

RICK RIORDAN



# MAGNUS CHASE

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**MAGNUS  
CHASE**  
and the GODS of ASGARD



THE SWORD OF SUMMER

Disney • HYPERION  
*Los Angeles New York*

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## About the Author

*To Cassandra Clare  
Thanks for letting me share the excellent name Magnus*



## Good Morning! You're Going to Die

YEAH, I KNOW. You guys are going to read about how I died in agony, and you're going to be like, "Wow! That sounds cool, Magnus! Can I die in agony too?"

No. Just no.

Don't go jumping off any rooftops. Don't run into the highway or set yourself on fire. It doesn't work that way. You will not end up where I ended up.

Besides, you wouldn't want to deal with my situation. Unless you've got some crazy desire to see undead warriors hacking one another to pieces, swords flying up giants' noses, and dark elves in snappy outfits, you shouldn't even *think* about finding the wolf-headed doors.

My name is Magnus Chase. I'm sixteen years old. This is the story of how my life went downhill after I got myself killed.

My day started out normal enough. I was sleeping on the sidewalk under a bridge in the Public Garden when a guy kicked me awake and said, "They're after you."

By the way, I've been homeless for the past two years.

Some of you may think, *Aw, how sad.* Others may think, *Ha, ha, loser!* But if you saw me on the street, ninety-nine percent of you would walk

right past like I'm invisible. You'd pray, *Don't let him ask me for money*. You'd wonder if I'm older than I look, because surely a teenager wouldn't be wrapped in a stinky old sleeping bag, stuck outside in the middle of a Boston winter. *Somebody should help that poor boy!*

Then you'd keep walking.

Whatever. I don't need your sympathy. I'm used to being laughed at. I'm definitely used to being ignored. Let's move on.

The bum who woke me was a guy called Blitz. As usual, he looked like he'd been running through a dirty hurricane. His wiry black hair was full of paper scraps and twigs. His face was the color of saddle leather, and was flecked with ice. His beard curled in all directions. Snow caked the bottom of his trench coat where it dragged around his feet—Blitz being about five feet five—and his eyes were so dilated, the irises were all pupil. His permanently alarmed expression made him look like he might start screaming any second.

I blinked the gunk out of my eyes. My mouth tasted like day-old hamburger. My sleeping bag was warm, and I really didn't want to get out of it.

“Who's after me?”

“Not sure.” Blitz rubbed his nose, which had been broken so many times it zigzagged like a lightning bolt. “They're handing out flyers with your name and picture.”

I cursed. Random police and park rangers I could deal with. Truant officers, community service volunteers, drunken college kids, addicts looking to roll somebody small and weak—all those would've been as easy to wake up to as pancakes and orange juice.

But when somebody knew my name and my face—that was bad. That meant they were targeting me specifically. Maybe the folks at the shelter were mad at me for breaking their stereo. (Those Christmas carols had been driving me crazy.) Maybe a security camera caught that last bit of pickpocketing I did in the Theater District. (Hey, I needed money for pizza.) Or maybe, unlikely as it seemed, the police were still looking for me, wanting to ask questions about my mom's murder....

I packed my stuff, which took about three seconds. The sleeping bag rolled up tight and fit in my backpack with my toothbrush and a change of socks and underwear. Except for the clothes on my back, that's all I owned. With the backpack over my shoulder and the hood of my jacket pulled low,

I could blend in with pedestrian traffic pretty well. Boston was full of college kids. Some of them were even more scraggly and younger-looking than me.

I turned to Blitz. “Where’d you see these people with the flyers?”

“Beacon Street. They’re coming this way. Middle-aged white guy and a teenage girl, probably his daughter.”

I frowned. “That makes no sense. Who—”

“I don’t know, kid, but I gotta go.” Blitz squinted at the sunrise, which was turning the skyscraper windows orange. For reasons I’d never quite understood, Blitz hated the daylight. Maybe he was the world’s shortest, stoutest homeless vampire. “You should go see Hearth. He’s hanging out in Copley Square.”

I tried not to feel irritated. The local street people jokingly called Hearth and Blitz my mom and dad because one or the other always seemed to be hovering around me.

“I appreciate it,” I said. “I’ll be fine.”

Blitz chewed his thumbnail. “I dunno, kid. Not today. You gotta be extra careful.”

“Why?”

He glanced over my shoulder. “They’re coming.”

I didn’t see anybody. When I turned back, Blitz was gone.

I hated it when he did that. Just—*Poof*. The guy was like a ninja. A homeless vampire ninja.

Now I had a choice: go to Copley Square and hang out with Hearth, or head toward Beacon Street and try to spot the people who were looking for me.

Blitz’s description of them made me curious. A middle-aged white guy and a teenage girl searching for me at sunrise on a bitter-cold morning.

Why? Who were they?

I crept along the edge of the pond. Almost nobody took the lower trail under the bridge. I could hug the side of the hill and spot anyone approaching on the higher path without them seeing me.

Snow coated the ground. The sky was eye-achingly blue. The bare tree branches looked like they’d been dipped in glass. The wind cut through my layers of clothes, but I didn’t mind the cold. My mom used to joke that I was half polar bear.

*Dammit, Magnus*, I chided myself.

After two years, my memories of her were still a minefield. I stumbled over one, and instantly my composure was blown to bits.

I tried to focus.

The man and the girl were coming this way. The man's sandy hair grew over his collar—not like an intentional style, but like he couldn't be bothered to cut it. His baffled expression reminded me of a substitute teacher's: *I know I was hit by a spit wad, but I have no idea where it came from.* His dress shoes were totally wrong for a Boston winter. His socks were different shades of brown. His tie looked like it had been tied while he spun around in total darkness.

The girl was definitely his daughter. Her hair was just as thick and wavy, though lighter blond. She was dressed more sensibly in snow boots, jeans, and a parka, with an orange T-shirt peeking out at the neckline. Her expression was more determined, angry. She gripped a sheaf of flyers like they were essays she'd been graded on unfairly.

If she was looking for me, I did not want to be found. She was scary.

I didn't recognize her or her dad, but something tugged at the back of my skull...like a magnet trying to pull out a very old memory.

Father and daughter stopped where the path forked. They looked around as if just now realizing they were standing in the middle of a deserted park at no-thank-you o'clock in the dead of winter.

"Unbelievable," said the girl. "I want to strangle him."

Assuming she meant me, I hunkered down a little more.

Her dad sighed. "We should probably avoid killing him. He *is* your uncle."

"But *two years?*" the girl demanded. "Dad, how could he not tell us for *two years?*"

"I can't explain Randolph's actions. I never could, Annabeth."

I inhaled so sharply, I was afraid they would hear me. A scab was ripped off my brain, exposing raw memories from when I was six years old.

*Annabeth.* Which meant the sandy-haired man was...*Uncle Frederick?*

I flashed back to the last family Thanksgiving we'd shared: Annabeth and me hiding in the library at Uncle Randolph's town house, playing with dominoes while the adults yelled at each other downstairs.

*You're lucky you live with your momma.* Annabeth stacked another domino on her miniature building. It was amazingly good, with columns in front like a temple. *I'm going to run away.*

I had no doubt she meant it. I was in awe of her confidence.

Then Uncle Frederick appeared in the doorway. His fists were clenched. His grim expression was at odds with the smiling reindeer on his sweater.  
*Annabeth, we're leaving.*

Annabeth looked at me. Her gray eyes were a little too fierce for a first grader's. *Be safe, Magnus.*

With a flick of her finger, she knocked over her domino temple.

That was the last time I'd seen her.

Afterward, my mom had been adamant: *We're staying away from your uncles. Especially Randolph. I won't give him what he wants. Ever.*

She wouldn't explain what Randolph wanted, or what she and Frederick and Randolph had argued about.

*You have to trust me, Magnus. Being around them...it's too dangerous.*

I trusted my mom. Even after her death, I hadn't had any contact with my relatives.

Now, suddenly, they were looking for me.

Randolph lived in town, but as far as I knew, Frederick and Annabeth still lived in Virginia. Yet here they were, passing out flyers with my name and photo on them. Where had they even gotten a photo of me?

My head buzzed so badly, I missed some of their conversation.

“—to find Magnus,” Uncle Frederick was saying. He checked his smartphone. “Randolph is at the city shelter in the South End. He says no luck. We should try the youth shelter across the park.”

“How do we even know Magnus is alive?” Annabeth asked miserably. “Missing for two years? He could be frozen in a ditch somewhere!”

Part of me was tempted to jump out of my hiding place and shout, *TA-DA!*

Even though it had been ten years since I'd seen Annabeth, I didn't like seeing her distressed. But after so long on the streets, I'd learned the hard way: you never walk into a situation until you understand what's going on.

“Randolph is sure Magnus is alive,” said Uncle Frederick. “He's somewhere in Boston. If his life is truly in danger...”

They set off toward Charles Street, their voices carried away by the wind.

I was shivering now, but it wasn't from the cold. I wanted to run after Frederick, tackle him, and demand to hear what was going on. How did

Randolph know I was still in town? Why were they looking for me? How was my life in danger now more than on any other day?

But I didn't follow them.

I remembered the last thing my mom ever told me. I'd been reluctant to use the fire escape, reluctant to leave her, but she'd gripped my arms and made me look at her. *Magnus, run. Hide. Don't trust anyone. I'll find you. Whatever you do, don't go to Randolph for help.*

Then, before I'd made it out the window, the door of our apartment had burst into splinters. Two pairs of glowing blue eyes had emerged from the darkness....

I shook off the memory and watched Uncle Frederick and Annabeth walk away, veering east toward the Common.

Uncle Randolph...For some reason, he'd contacted Frederick and Annabeth. He'd gotten them to Boston. All this time, Frederick and Annabeth hadn't known that my mom was dead and I was missing. It seemed impossible, but if it were true, why would Randolph tell them about it now?

Without confronting him directly, I could think of only one way to get answers. His town house was in Back Bay, an easy walk from here. According to Frederick, Randolph wasn't home. He was somewhere in the South End, looking for me.

Since nothing started a day better than a little breaking and entering, I decided to pay his place a visit.



## The Man with the Metal Bra

### THE FAMILY MANSION SUCKED.

Oh, sure, *you* wouldn't think so. You'd see the massive six-story brownstone with gargoyles on the corners of the roof, stained glass transom windows, marble front steps, and all the other blah, blah, blah, rich-people-live-here details, and you'd wonder why I'm sleeping on the streets.

Two words: *Uncle Randolph*.

It was *his* house. As the oldest son, he'd inherited it from my grandparents, who died before I was born. I never knew much about the family soap opera, but there was a lot of bad blood between the three kids: Randolph, Frederick, and my mom. After the Great Thanksgiving Schism, we never visited the ancestral homestead again. Our apartment was, like, half a mile away, but Randolph might as well have lived on Mars.

My mom only mentioned him if we happened to be driving past the brownstone. Then she would point it out the way you might point out a dangerous cliff. *See? There it is. Avoid it.*

After I started living on the streets, I would sometimes walk by at night. I'd peer in the windows and see glowing display cases of antique swords and axes, creepy helmets with facemasks staring at me from the walls, statues silhouetted in the upstairs windows like petrified ghosts.

Several times I considered breaking in to poke around, but I'd never been tempted to knock on the door. *Please, Uncle Randolph, I know you hated my mother and haven't seen me in ten years; I know you care more about your rusty old collectibles than you do about your family; but may I live in your fine house and eat your leftover crusts of bread?*

No thanks. I'd rather be on the street, eating day-old falafel from the food court.

Still...I figured it would be simple enough to break in, look around, and see if I could find answers about what was going on. While I was there, maybe I could grab some stuff to pawn.

Sorry if that offends your sense of right and wrong.

Oh, wait. No, I'm not.

I don't steal from just anybody. I choose obnoxious jerks who have too much already. If you're driving a new BMW and you park it in a handicapped spot without a disabled placard, then yeah, I've got no problem jimmying your window and taking some change from your cup holder. If you're coming out of Barneys with your bag of silk handkerchiefs, so busy talking on your phone and pushing people out of your way that you're not paying attention, I am there for you, ready to pickpocket your wallet. If you can afford five thousand dollars to blow your nose, you can afford to buy me dinner.

I am judge, jury, and thief. And as far as obnoxious jerks went, I figured I couldn't do better than Uncle Randolph.

The house fronted Commonwealth Avenue. I headed around back to the poetically named Public Alley 429. Randolph's parking spot was empty. Stairs led down to the basement entrance. If there was a security system, I couldn't spot it. The door was a simple latch lock without even a deadbolt. *Come on, Randolph. At least make it a challenge.*

Two minutes later I was inside.

In the kitchen, I helped myself to some sliced turkey, crackers, and milk from the carton. No falafel. Dammit. Now I was really in the mood for some, but I found a chocolate bar and stuffed it in my coat pocket for later. (Chocolate must be savored, not rushed.) Then I headed upstairs into a mausoleum of mahogany furniture, oriental rugs, oil paintings, marble tiled floors, and crystal chandeliers....It was just embarrassing. Who lives like this?

At age six, I couldn't appreciate how expensive all this stuff was, but my general impression of the mansion was the same: dark, oppressive, creepy. It was hard to imagine my mom growing up here. It was easy to understand why she'd become a fan of the great outdoors.

Our apartment over the Korean BBQ joint in Allston had been cozy enough, but Mom never liked being inside. She always said her real home was the Blue Hills. We used to go hiking and camping there in all kinds of weather—fresh air, no walls or ceilings, no company but the ducks, geese, and squirrels.

This brownstone, by comparison, felt like a prison. As I stood alone in the foyer, my skin crawled with invisible beetles.

I climbed to the second floor. The library smelled of lemon polish and leather, just like I remembered. Along one wall was a lit glass case full of Randolph's rusty Viking helmets and corroded ax blades. My mom once told me that Randolph taught history at Harvard before some big disgrace got him fired. She wouldn't go into details, but clearly the guy was still an artifact nut.

*You're smarter than either of your uncles, Magnus,* my mom once told me. *With your grades, you could easily get into Harvard.*

That had been back when she was still alive, I was still in school, and I might have had a future that extended past finding my next meal.

In one corner of Randolph's office sat a big slab of rock like a tombstone, the front chiseled and painted with elaborate red swirly designs. In the center was a crude drawing of a snarling beast—maybe a lion or a wolf.

I shuddered. Let's not think about wolves.

I approached Randolph's desk. I'd been hoping for a computer, or a notepad with helpful information—anything to explain why they were looking for me. Instead, spread across the desk were pieces of parchment as thin and yellow as onionskin. They looked like maps a school kid in medieval times had made for social studies: faint sketches of a coastline, various points labeled in an alphabet I didn't know. Sitting on top of them, like a paperweight, was a leather pouch.

My breath caught. I recognized that pouch. I untied the drawstring and grabbed one of the dominoes...except it wasn't a domino. My six-year-old self had assumed that's what Annabeth and I had been playing with. Over

the years, the memory had reinforced itself. But instead of dots, these stones were painted with red symbols.

The one in my hand was shaped like a tree branch or a deformed *F*:



My heart pounded. I wasn't sure why. I wondered if coming here had been such a good idea. The walls felt like they were closing in. On the big rock in the corner, the drawing of the beast seemed to sneer at me, its red outline glistening like fresh blood.

I moved to the window. I thought it might help to look outside. Along the center of the avenue stretched the Commonwealth Mall—a ribbon of parkland covered in snow. The bare trees were strung with white Christmas lights. At the end of the block, inside an iron fence, the bronze statue of Leif Erikson stood on his pedestal, his hand cupped over his eyes. Leif gazed toward the Charlesgate overpass as if to say *Look, I discovered a highway!*

My mom and I used to joke about Leif. His armor was on the skimpy side: a short skirt and a breastplate that looked like a Viking bra.

I had no clue why that statue was in the middle of Boston, but I figured it couldn't be a coincidence that Uncle Randolph grew up to study Vikings. He'd lived here his whole life. He'd probably looked at Leif every day out the window. Maybe as a child Randolph had thought, *Someday, I want to study Vikings. Men who wear metal bras are cool!*

My eyes drifted to the base of the statue. Somebody was standing there...looking up at me.

You know how when you see somebody out of context and it takes you a second to recognize them? In Leif Erikson's shadow stood a tall pale man in a black leather jacket, black motorcycle pants, and pointy-toed boots. His short spiky hair was so blond it was almost white. His only dash of color was a striped red-and-white scarf wrapped around his neck and spilling off his shoulders like a melted candy cane.

If I didn't know him, I might've guessed he was cosplaying some anime character. But I *did* know him. It was Hearth, my fellow homeless dude and surrogate "mom."

I was a little creeped out, a little offended. Had he seen me on the street and followed me? I didn't need some fairy god-stalker looking after me.

I spread my hands: *What are you doing here?*

Hearth made a gesture like he was plucking something from his cupped hand and throwing it away. After two years of hanging around him, I was getting pretty good at reading sign language.

He was saying *GET OUT*.

He didn't look alarmed, but it was hard to tell with Hearth. He never showed much emotion. Whenever we hung out, he mostly just stared at me with those pale gray eyes like he was waiting for me to explode.

I lost valuable seconds trying to figure out what he meant, why he was here when he was supposed to be in Copley Square.

He gestured again: both hands pointing forward with two fingers, dipping up and down twice. *Hurry*.

"Why?" I said aloud.

Behind me, a deep voice said, "Hello, Magnus."

I nearly jumped out of my shoes. Standing in the library doorway was a barrel-chested man with a trim white beard and a skullcap of gray hair. He wore a beige cashmere overcoat over a dark wool suit. His gloved hands gripped the handle of a polished wooden cane with an iron tip. Last time I'd seen him his hair had been black, but I knew that voice.

"Randolph."

He inclined his head a millimeter. "What a pleasant surprise. I'm glad you're here." He sounded neither surprised nor glad. "We don't have much time."

The food and milk started to churn in my stomach. "M-much time... before what?"

His brow furrowed. His nose wrinkled as if he detected a mildly unpleasant odor. "You're sixteen today, aren't you? They'll be coming to kill you."



## Don't Accept Rides from Strange Relatives

WELL, HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO ME!

Was it January 13? Honestly, I had no idea. Time flies when you're sleeping under bridges and eating from Dumpsters.

So I was officially sixteen. For my present, I got cornered by Uncle Freaky, who announced that I was marked for assassination.

“Who—” I started to ask. “You know what? Never mind. Nice seeing you, Randolph. I’ll be going now.”

Randolph remained in the doorway, blocking my exit. He pointed the iron tip of his cane at me. I swear I could feel it pushing against my sternum from across the room.

“Magnus, we need to talk. I don’t want them to get to you. Not after what happened to your mother....”

A punch in the face would’ve been less painful.

Memories from that night spun through my head like a sickening kaleidoscope: our apartment building shuddering, a scream from the floor below, my mother—who’d been tense and paranoid all day—dragging me toward the fire escape, telling me to run. The door splintered and burst. From the hallway, two beasts emerged, their pelts the color of dirty snow, their eyes glowing blue. My fingers slipped off the fire escape railing and I

fell, landing in a pile of garbage bags in the alley. Moments later, the windows of our apartment exploded, belching fire.

My mom had told me to run. I did. She'd promised to find me. She never did. Later, on the news, I heard that her body had been recovered from the fire. The police were searching for me. They had questions: signs of arson; my record of disciplinary problems at school; neighbors' reports of shouting and a loud crash from our apartment just before the explosion; the fact that I'd run from the scene. None of the reports mentioned wolves with glowing eyes.

Ever since that night I'd been hiding, living under the radar, too busy surviving to grieve properly for my mom, wondering if I'd hallucinated those beasts...but I knew I hadn't.

Now, after all this time, Uncle Randolph wanted to help me.

I gripped the little domino stone so tightly, it cut into my palm. "You don't know what happened to my mom. You never cared about either of us."

Randolph lowered his cane. He leaned on it heavily and stared at the carpet. I could almost believe I'd hurt his feelings.

"I pleaded with your mother," he said. "I wanted her to bring you here—to live where I could protect you. She refused. After she died..." He shook his head. "Magnus, you have no idea how long I've looked for you, or how much danger you're in."

"I'm fine," I snapped, though my heart was thumping against my ribs. "I've been taking care of myself pretty well."

"Perhaps, but those days are over." The certainty in Randolph's voice gave me a chill. "You're sixteen now, the age of manhood. You escaped them once, the night your mother died. They won't let you escape again. This is our last chance. Let me help you, or you won't live through the day."

The low winter light shifted across the stained glass transom, washing Randolph's face in changing colors, chameleon-style.

I shouldn't have come here. Stupid, stupid, stupid. Over and over, my mom had given me one clear message: *Don't go to Randolph*. Yet here I was.

The longer I listened to him, the more terrified I got, and the more desperately I wanted to hear what he had to say.

"I don't need your help." I set the strange little domino on the desk. "I don't want—"

“I know about the wolves.”

That stopped me.

“I know what you saw,” he continued. “I know who sent the creatures. Regardless of what the police think, I know how your mother really died.”

“How—”

“Magnus, there’s so much I need to tell you about your parents, about your inheritance....About your father.”

An ice-cold wire threaded its way down my spine. “You knew my father?”

I didn’t want to give Randolph any leverage. Living on the street had taught me how dangerous leverage could be. But he had me hooked. I *needed* to hear this information. Judging from the appraising gleam in his eyes, he knew it.

“Yes, Magnus. Your father’s identity, your mother’s murder, the reason she refused my help...it’s all connected.” He gestured toward his display of Viking goodies. “My whole life, I’ve been working toward one goal. I’ve been trying to solve a historical mystery. Until recently, I didn’t see the whole picture. Now I do. It’s all been leading to *this* day, your sixteenth birthday.”

I backed up to the window, as far as I could get from Uncle Randolph. “Look, I don’t understand ninety percent of what you’re saying, but if you can tell me about my dad—”

The building rattled like a volley of cannons had gone off in the distance—a *rumble* so low I felt it in my teeth.

“They’ll be here soon,” Randolph warned. “We’re running out of time.”

“Who are *they*? ”

Randolph limped forward, relying on his cane. His right knee didn’t seem to work. “I’m asking a lot, Magnus. You have no reason to trust me. But you need to come with me *right now*. I know where your birthright is.” He pointed to the old maps on the desk. “Together, we can retrieve what is yours. It’s the only thing that might protect you.”

I glanced over my shoulder, out the window. Down in the Commonwealth Mall, Hearth had disappeared. I should have done the same. Looking at Uncle Randolph, I tried to see any resemblance to my mother, anything that might inspire me to trust him. I found nothing. His imposing bulk, his intense dark eyes, his humorless face and stiff manner... he was the exact opposite of my mom.

“My car is out back,” he said.

“M-maybe we should wait for Annabeth and Uncle Frederick.”

Randolph grimaced. “They don’t believe me. They *never* believed me. Out of desperation, as a last resort, I brought them to Boston to help me look for you, but now that you’re here—”

The building shook again. This time the *boom* felt closer and stronger. I wanted to believe it was from construction nearby, or a military ceremony, or anything easily explainable. But my gut told me otherwise. The noise sounded like the fall of a gargantuan foot—like the noise that had shaken our apartment two years ago.

“Please, Magnus.” Randolph’s voice quavered. “I lost my *own* family to those monsters. I lost my wife, my daughters.”

“You—you had a family? My mom never said anything—”

“No, she wouldn’t have. But your mother...Natalie was my only sister. I loved her. I hated to lose her. I can’t lose you, too. Come with me. Your father left something for you to find—something that will change the worlds.”

Too many questions crowded my brain. I didn’t like the crazy light in Randolph’s eyes. I didn’t like the way he said *worlds*, plural. And I didn’t believe he’d been trying to find me since my mom died. I had my antenna up constantly. If Randolph had been asking about me by name, one of my street friends would’ve tipped me off, like Blitz had done this morning with Annabeth and Frederick.

Something had changed—something that made Randolph decide I was worth looking for.

“What if I just run?” I asked. “Will you try to stop me?”

“If you run, they’ll find you. They’ll kill you.”

My throat felt like it was full of cotton balls. I didn’t trust Randolph. Unfortunately, I believed he was in earnest about people trying to kill me. His voice had the ring of truth.

“Well, then,” I said, “let’s go for a ride.”



## Seriously, the Dude Cannot Drive

YOU’VE HEARD ABOUT bad Boston drivers? That’s my Uncle Randolph.

The dude gunned his BMW 528i (of course it *had* to be a BMW) and shot down Commonwealth Avenue, ignoring the lights, honking at other cars, weaving randomly from lane to lane.

“You missed a pedestrian,” I said. “You want to go back and hit her?”

Randolph was too distracted to answer. He kept glancing at the sky as if looking for storm clouds. He gunned the BMW through the intersection at Exeter.

“So,” I said, “where are we going?”

“The bridge.”

That explained everything. There were, like, twenty bridges in the Boston area.

I ran my hand along the heated leather seat. It had been maybe six months since I’d ridden in a car. The last time it had been a social worker’s Toyota. Before that, a police cruiser. Both times I’d used a fake name. Both times I’d escaped, but over the past two years I’d come to equate cars with holding cells. I wasn’t sure my luck had changed any today.

I waited for Randolph to answer any of the nagging little questions I had, like, oh: Who’s my dad? Who murdered my mom? How did you lose

your wife and kids? Are you presently hallucinating? Did you really have to wear that clove-scented cologne?

But he was too busy causing traffic havoc.

Finally, just to make small talk, I asked, “So who’s trying to kill me?”

He turned right on Arlington. We skirted the Public Garden, past the equestrian statue of George Washington, the rows of gaslight lampposts and snow-covered hedges. I was tempted to bail out of the car, run back to the swan pond, and hide in my sleeping bag.

“Magnus,” said Randolph, “I’ve made my life’s work studying the Norse exploration of North America.”

“Wow, thanks,” I said. “That really answered my question.”

Suddenly, Randolph *did* remind me of my mom. He gave me the same exasperated scowl, the same look over the top of his glasses, like *Please, kid, cut the sarcasm*. The similarity made my chest ache.

“Fine,” I said. “I’ll humor you. Norse exploration. You mean the Vikings.”

Randolph winced. “Well...*Viking* means *raider*. It’s more of a job description. Not all Norse people were Vikings. But, yes, those guys.”

“The statue of Leif Erikson...Does that mean the Vikings—er, the Norse—discovered Boston? I thought the Pilgrims did that.”

“I could give you a three-hour lecture on that topic alone.”

“Please don’t.”

“Suffice it to say, the Norse explored North America and even built settlements around the year 1000, almost five hundred years before Christopher Columbus. Scholars agree on that.”

“That’s a relief. I hate it when scholars disagree.”

“But no one is sure how far south the Norse sailed. Did they make it to what is now the United States? That statue of Leif Erikson...that was the pet project of a wishful thinker in the 1800s, a man named Eben Horsford. He was convinced that Boston was the lost Norse settlement of Norumbega, their farthest point of exploration. He had an instinct, a gut feeling, but no real proof. Most historians wrote him off as a crackpot.”

He looked at me meaningfully.

“Let me guess...you don’t think he’s a crackpot.” I resisted the urge to say *Takes one to believe one*.

“Those maps on my desk,” Randolph said. “They are the proof. My colleagues call them forgeries, but they’re not. I staked my reputation on

it!"

*And that's why you got fired from Harvard,* I thought.

"The Norse explorers did make it this far," he continued. "They were searching for something...and they found it here. One of their ships sank nearby. For years I thought the shipwreck was in Massachusetts Bay. I sacrificed everything to find it. I bought my own boat, took my wife, my children on expeditions. The last time..." His voice broke. "The storm came out of nowhere, the fires..."

He didn't seem anxious to share more, but I got the general idea: he'd lost his family at sea. He really *had* staked everything on his crazy theory about Vikings in Boston.

I felt bad for the guy, sure. I also didn't want to be his next casualty.

We stopped at the corner of Boylston and Charles.

"Maybe I'll just get out here." I tried the handle. The door was locked from the driver's side.

"Magnus, listen. It's no accident you were born in Boston. Your father wanted you to find what he lost two thousand years ago."

My feet got jumpy. "Did you just say...two thousand years?"

"Give or take."

I considered screaming and pounding on the window. Would anybody help me? If I could get out of the car, maybe I could find Uncle Frederick and Annabeth, assuming they were any less insane than Randolph.

We turned onto Charles Street, heading north between the Public Garden and the Common. Randolph could've been taking me anywhere—Cambridge, the North End, or some out-of-the-way body dump.

I tried to keep calm. "Two thousand years...that's a longer lifespan than your average dad."

Randolph's face reminded me of the Man in the Moon from old black-and-white cartoons: pale and rotund, pitted and scarred, with a secretive smile that wasn't very friendly. "Magnus, what do you know about Norse mythology?"

*This just gets better and better,* I thought.

"Uh, not much. My mom had a picture book she used to read me when I was little. And weren't there a couple of movies about Thor?"

Randolph shook his head in disgust. "Those movies...ridiculously inaccurate. The real gods of Asgard—Thor, Loki, Odin, and the rest—are

much more powerful, much more terrifying than anything Hollywood could concoct.”

“But...they’re myths. They’re not real.”

Randolph gave me a sort of a pitying look. “Myths are simply stories about truths we’ve forgotten.”

“So, look, I just remembered I have an appointment down the street—”

“A millennium ago, Norse explorers came to this land.” Randolph drove us past the Cheers bar on Beacon Street, where bundled-up tourists were taking photos of themselves in front of the sign. I spotted a crumpled flyer skittering across the sidewalk: it had the word MISSING and an old picture of me. One of the tourists stepped on it.

“The captain of these explorers,” Randolph continued, “was a son of the god Skirnir.”

“A son of a god. Really, anywhere around here is good. I can walk.”

“This man carried a very special item,” Randolph said, “something that once belonged to your father. When the Norse ship went down in a storm, that item was lost. But you—you have the ability to find it.”

I tried the door again. Still locked.

The really bad part? The more Randolph talked, the less I could convince myself that he was nuts. His story seeped into my mind—storms, wolves, gods, Asgard. The words clicked into place like pieces of a puzzle I’d never had the courage to finish. I was starting to believe him, and that scared the baked beans out of me.

Randolph whipped around the access road for Storrow Drive. He parked at a meter on Cambridge Street. To the north, past the elevated tracks of the Mass General T station, rose the stone towers of the Longfellow Bridge.

“That’s where we’re going?” I asked.

Randolph fished for quarters in his cup holder. “All these years, it was so much closer than I realized. I just needed you!”

“I’m definitely feeling the love.”

“You are sixteen today.” Randolph’s eyes danced with excitement. “It’s the perfect day for you to reclaim your birthright. But it’s also what your enemies have been waiting for. We have to find it first.”

“But—”

“Trust me a little while longer, Magnus. Once we have the weapon—”

“Weapon? Now my birthright is a *weapon*? ”

“Once you have it in your possession, you’ll be much safer. I can explain everything to you. I can help you train for what’s to come.”

He opened his car door. Before he could get out, I grabbed his wrist.

I usually avoid touching people. Physical contact creeps me out. But I needed his full attention.

“Give me one answer,” I said. “One *clear* answer, without the rambling and the history lectures. You said you knew my dad. Who is he?”

Randolph placed his hand over mine, which made me squirm. His palm was too rough and calloused for a history professor’s. “On my life, Magnus, I swear this is the truth: your father is a Norse god. Now, hurry. We’re in a twenty-minute parking spot.”



## I've Always Wanted to Destroy a Bridge

“YOU CAN’T DROP a bombshell like that and walk away!” I yelled as Randolph walked away.

Despite his cane and his stiff leg, the guy could really move. He was like an Olympic gold medalist in hobbling. He forged ahead, climbing the sidewalk of the Longfellow Bridge as I jogged after him, the wind screaming in my ears.

The morning commuters were coming in from Cambridge. A single line of cars was backed up the length of the span, barely moving. You’d think my uncle and I would be the only ones dumb enough to walk across the bridge in subzero weather, but this being Boston, half a dozen runners were chugging along, looking like emaciated seals in their Lycra bodysuits. A mom with two kids bundled in a stroller was walking on the opposite sidewalk. Her kids looked about as happy as I felt.

My uncle was still fifteen feet ahead of me.

“Randolph!” I called. “I’m talking to you!”

“The drift of the river,” he muttered. “The landfill on the banks... allowing for a thousand years of shifting tidal patterns—”

“Yo!” I caught the sleeve of his cashmere coat. “Rewind to the part about a Norse god being my pappy.”

Randolph scanned our surroundings. We'd stopped at one of the bridge's main towers—a cone of granite rising fifty feet above us. People said the towers looked like giant salt and pepper shakers, but I'd always thought they looked like Daleks from *Doctor Who*. (So I'm a nerd. Sue me. And, yes, even homeless kids watch TV sometimes—in shelter rec rooms, on public library computers....We have our ways.)

A hundred feet below us, the Charles River glistened steel gray, its surface mottled with patches of snow and ice like the skin of a massive python.

Randolph leaned so far over the railing it made me jittery.

"The irony," he muttered. "Here, of all places..."

"So, anyway," I said, "about my father..."

Randolph gripped my shoulder. "Look down there, Magnus. What do you see?"

Cautiously I glanced over the side. "Water."

"No, the carved ornamentation, just below us."

I looked again. About halfway down the side of the pier, a shelf of granite jutted over the water like a theater seating box with a pointy tip. "It looks like a nose."

"No, it's...Well, from this angle, it *does* sort of look like a nose. But it's the prow of a Viking longship. See? The other pier has one too. The poet Longfellow, for whom the bridge was named—he was fascinated by the Norse. Wrote poems about their gods. Like Eben Horsford, Longfellow believed the Vikings had explored Boston. Hence the designs on the bridge."

"You should give tours," I said. "All the rabid Longfellow fans would pay big bucks."

"Don't you see?" Randolph still had his hand on my shoulder, which wasn't making me any less anxious. "So many people over the centuries have known. They've *felt* it instinctively, even if they had no proof. This area wasn't just *visited* by the Vikings. It was *sacred* to them! Right below us—somewhere near these decorative longships—is the wreck of an *actual* longship, holding a cargo of incalculable value."

"I still see water. And I still want to hear about Dad."

"Magnus, the Norse explorers came here searching for the axis of the worlds, the very trunk of the tree. They found it—"

A low *boom* echoed across the river. The bridge shook. About a mile away, amid the thicket of chimneys and steeples of Back Bay, a column of oily black smoke mushroomed skyward.

I steadied myself against the railing. “Um, wasn’t that close to your house?”

Randolph’s expression hardened. His stubbly beard glistened silver in the sunlight.

“We’re out of time. Magnus, extend your hand over the water. The sword is down there. Call it. Focus on it as if it’s the most important thing in the world—the thing you want the most.”

“A sword? I—look, Randolph, I can tell you’re having a hard day, but —”

“DO IT.”

The sternness in his voice made me flinch. Randolph *had* to be insane, talking about gods and swords and ancient shipwrecks. Yet the column of smoke over Back Bay was very real. Sirens wailed in the distance. On the bridge, drivers stuck their heads out their windows to gawk, holding up smartphones and taking pictures.

And as much as I wanted to deny it, Randolph’s words resonated with me. For the first time, I felt like my body was humming at the right frequency, like I’d finally been tuned to match the crappy soundtrack of my life.

I stretched my hand out over the river.

Nothing happened.

*Of course nothing happened*, I chided myself. *What were you expecting?*

The bridge shook more violently. Down the sidewalk, a jogger stumbled. From behind me came the *crunch* of one car rear-ending another. Horns blared.

Above the rooftops of Back Bay, a second column of smoke billowed. Ash and orange cinders sprayed upward as if the explosion were volcanic, spewing from the ground.

“That—that was a lot closer,” I noted. “It’s like something is zeroing in on us.”

I really hoped Randolph would say *Nah, of course not. Don’t be silly!*

He seemed to get older before my eyes. His wrinkles darkened. His shoulders slumped. He leaned heavily on his cane. “Please, not again,” he

muttered to himself. “Not like last time.”

“Last time?” Then I remembered what he’d said about losing his wife and daughters—a storm out of nowhere, fires.

Randolph locked eyes with me. “Try again, Magnus. Please.”

I thrust my hand toward the river. I imagined I was reaching for my mom, trying to pull her from the past—trying to save her from the wolves and the burning apartment. I reached for answers that might explain why I’d lost her, why my whole life since then had been nothing but a downhill spiral of *suck*.

Directly below me, the surface of the water began to steam. Ice melted. Snow evaporated, leaving a hole in the shape of a hand—my hand, twenty times larger.

I didn’t know what I was doing. I’d had the same feeling when my mom first taught me to ride a bike. *Don’t think about what you’re doing, Magnus. Don’t hesitate, or you’ll fall. Just keep going.*

I swept my hand back and forth. A hundred feet below, the steaming hand mirrored my movements, clearing the surface of the Charles.

Suddenly I stopped. A pinpoint of warmth hit the center of my palm as if I’d intercepted a beam of sunlight.

Something was down there...a heat source buried deep in the frigid mud of the river bottom. I closed my fingers and pulled.

A dome of water swelled and ruptured like a dry-ice bubble. An object resembling a lead pipe shot upward and landed in my hand.

It looked nothing like a sword. I held it by one end, but there was no hilt. If it had ever had a point or a sharp edge, it didn’t now. The thing was about the right size for a blade, but it was so pitted and corroded, so encrusted with barnacles and glistening with mud and slime, I couldn’t even be sure it was metal. In short, it was the saddest, flimsiest, most disgusting piece of scrap I’d ever magically pulled from a river.

“At last!” Randolph lifted his eyes to the heavens. I got the feeling that, if not for his bum knee, he might’ve knelt on the pavement and offered a prayer to the nonexistent Norse gods.

“Yeah.” I hefted my new prize. “I feel safer already.”

“You can renew it!” Randolph said. “Just try!”

I turned the blade. I was surprised that it hadn’t already disintegrated in my hand.

“I dunno, Randolph. This thing looks way past renewing. I’m not even sure it can be recycled.”

If I sound unimpressed or ungrateful, don’t get me wrong. The way I’d pulled the sword out of the river was so cool it freaked me out. I’d always wanted a superpower. I just hadn’t expected mine to entail retrieving garbage from river bottoms. The community service volunteers were going to love me.

“Concentrate, Magnus!” Randolph said. “Quickly, before—”

Fifty feet away, the center of the bridge erupted in flames. The shock wave pushed me against the rail. The right side of my face felt sunburned. Pedestrians screamed. Cars swerved and crashed into one another.

For some stupid reason, I ran toward the explosion. It was like I couldn’t help myself. Randolph shuffled after me, calling my name, but his voice seemed far away, unimportant.

Fire danced across the roofs of cars. Windows shattered from the heat, spraying the street with glass gravel. Drivers scrambled out of their vehicles and fled.

It looked like a meteor had hit the bridge. A ten-foot-diameter circle of asphalt was charred and steaming. In the center of the impact zone stood a human-size figure: a dark man in a dark suit.

When I say dark, I mean his skin was the purest, most beautiful shade of black I’d ever seen. Squid ink at midnight would not have been so black. His clothes were the same: a well-tailored jacket and slacks, a crisp dress shirt and tie—all cut from the fabric of a neutron star. His face was inhumanly handsome, chiseled obsidian. His long hair was combed back in an immaculate oil slick. His pupils glowed like tiny rings of lava.

I thought, If Satan were real, he would look like this guy.

Then I thought, No, Satan would be a schlub next to this guy. This guy is like Satan’s fashion consultant.

Those red eyes locked on to me.

“Magnus Chase.” His voice was deep and resonant, his accent vaguely German or Scandinavian. “You have brought me a gift.”

An abandoned Toyota Corolla stood between us. Satan’s fashion consultant walked straight through it, melting a path down the middle of the chassis like a blowtorch through wax.

The sizzling halves of the Corolla collapsed behind him, the wheels melted to puddles.

“I will make you a gift as well.” The dark man extended his hand. Smoke curled off his sleeve and ebony fingers. “Give me the sword and I will spare your life.”



## Make Way for Ducklings, or They Will Smack You Upside the Head

I'D SEEN SOME WEIRD STUFF IN MY LIFE.

I once watched a crowd of people wearing nothing but Speedos and Santa hats jog down Boylston in the middle of winter. I met a guy who could play the harmonica with his nose, a drum set with his feet, a guitar with his hands, and a xylophone with his butt all at the same time. I knew a woman who'd adopted a grocery cart and named it Clarence. Then there was the dude who claimed to be from Alpha Centauri and had philosophical conversations with Canada geese.

So a well-dressed Satanic male model who could melt cars...why not? My brain just kind of expanded to accommodate the weirdness.

The dark man waited, his hand outstretched. The air around him rippled with heat.

About a hundred feet down the span, a Red Line commuter train ground to a halt. The conductor gawked at the chaos in front of her. Two joggers tried to pull a guy from a half-crushed Prius. The lady with the double stroller was unfastening her screaming kids, the stroller's wheels having melted into ovals. Standing next to her, instead of helping, one idiot held up his smartphone and tried to film the destruction. His hand was shaking so badly I doubted he was getting a very good picture.

Now at my shoulder, Randolph said, “The sword, Magnus. Use it!”

I got the uncomfortable impression my big burly uncle was hiding behind me.

The dark man chuckled. “Professor Chase...I admire your persistence. I thought our last encounter would’ve broken your spirit. But here you are, ready to sacrifice another family member!”

“Be quiet, Surt!” Randolph’s voice was shrill. “Magnus has the sword! Go back to the fires from whence you came.”

Surt didn’t seem intimidated, though personally I found the word *whence* very intimidating.

Fire Dude studied me like I was as barnacle-encrusted as the sword. “Give it here, boy, or I will show you the power of Muspell. I will incinerate this bridge and everyone on it.”

Surt raised his arms. Flames slithered between his fingers. At his feet, the pavement bubbled. More windshields shattered. The train tracks groaned. The Red Line conductor yelled frantically into her walkie-talkie. The pedestrian with the smartphone fainted. The mom collapsed over the stroller, her kids still crying inside. Randolph grunted and staggered backward.

Surt’s heat didn’t make me pass out. It just made me angry. I didn’t know who this fiery jack-hole was, but I knew a bully when I met one. First rule of the streets: Never let a bully take your stuff.

I pointed my once-might-have-been-a-sword at Surt. “Cool down, man. I have a corroded piece of metal and I’m not afraid to use it.”

Surt sneered. “Just like your father, you are no fighter.”

I clenched my teeth. *Okay, I thought, time to ruin this guy’s outfit.*

But before I could take action, something whizzed past my ear and smacked Surt in the forehead.

Had it been a *real* arrow, Surt would’ve been in trouble. Fortunately for him, it was a plastic toy projectile with a pink heart for a point—a Valentine’s Day novelty, I guessed. It hit Surt between the eyes with a cheerful *squeak*, fell to his feet, and promptly melted.

Surt blinked. He looked as confused as I was.

Behind me a familiar voice shouted, “Run, kid!”

Charging up the bridge came my buddies Blitz and Hearth. Well...I say *charging*. That implies it was impressive. It really wasn’t. For some reason, Blitz had donned a broad-brimmed hat and sunglasses along with his black

trench coat, so he looked like a grungy, very short Italian priest. In his gloved hands he wielded a fearsome wooden dowel with a bright yellow traffic sign that read: MAKE WAY FOR DUCKLINGS.

Hearth's red-striped scarf trailed behind him like limp wings. He nocked another arrow in his pink plastic Cupid's bow and fired at Surt.

Bless their demented little hearts, I understood where they'd gotten the ridiculous weapons: the toy store on Charles Street. I panhandled in front of that place sometimes, and they had that stuff in their window display. Somehow, Blitz and Hearth must've followed me here. In their rush, they'd done a smash-and-grab of the nearest deadly objects. Being crazed homeless guys, they hadn't chosen very well.

Dumb and pointless? You bet. But it warmed my heart that they wanted to look out for me.

"We'll cover you!" Blitz charged by me. "Run!"

Surt hadn't been expecting an attack by lightly armed bums. He stood there while Blitz smacked him across the head with the MAKE WAY FOR DUCKLINGS sign. Hearth's next squeaky arrow misfired and hit me in the butt.

"Hey!" I complained.

Being deaf, Hearth couldn't hear me. He ran past me and into battle, thwacking Surt in the chest with his plastic bow.

Uncle Randolph grabbed my arm. He was wheezing badly. "Magnus, we have to go. NOW!"

Maybe I should have run, but I stood there frozen, watching my only two friends attack the dark lord of fire with cheap plastic toys.

Finally Surt tired of the game. He backhanded Hearth and sent him flying across the pavement. He kicked Blitz in the chest so hard the little guy stumbled backward and landed on his butt right in front of me.

"Enough." Surt extended his arm. From his open palm, fire spiraled and elongated until he was holding a curved sword made entirely of white flame. "I am annoyed now. You will all die."

"Gods' galoshes!" Blitz stammered. "That's not just any fire giant. That's the Black One!"

*As opposed to the Yellow One?* I wanted to ask, but the sight of the flaming sword kind of stifled my will to joke.

Around Surt, flames began to swirl. The firestorm spiraled outward, melting cars to slag heaps, liquefying the pavement, popping rivets from the

bridge like champagne corks.

I'd only *thought* it was warm before. Now Surt was really turning up the temperature.

Hearth slumped against the railing about thirty feet away. The unconscious pedestrians and trapped motorists wouldn't last long either. Even if the flames didn't touch them, they'd die from asphyxiation or heat stroke. But for some reason, the heat still didn't bother me.

Randolph stumbled, hanging off my arm with his full weight. "I—I... hum, umm..."

"Blitz," I said, "get my uncle out of here. Drag him if you have to."

Blitz's sunglasses were steaming. The brim of his hat was beginning to smolder. "Kid, you can't fight that guy. That's Surt, the Black One himself!"

"You said that already."

"But Hearth and me—we're supposed to protect *you*!"

I wanted to snap *And you're doing a great job with the MAKE WAY FOR DUCKLINGS sign!* But what could I expect from a couple of homeless dudes? They weren't exactly commandos. They were just my friends. There was no way I'd let them die defending me. As for Uncle Randolph...I hardly knew the guy. I didn't much like him. But he was family. He'd said he couldn't stand to lose another family member. Yeah, well neither could I. This time I wasn't going to run away.

"Go," I told Blitz. "I'll get Hearth."

Somehow Blitz managed to hold up my uncle. Together they stumbled off.

Surt laughed. "The sword will be mine, boy. You cannot change fate. I will reduce your world to cinders!"

I turned to face him. "You're starting to aggravate me. I have to kill you now."

I walked into the wall of flames.



## You Look Great Without a Nose, Really

WOW, *MAGNUS*, you're probably thinking. *That was...stupid!*

Thanks. I have my moments.

Normally I don't go stepping into walls of flame. But I had a feeling it wouldn't hurt me. I know that sounds weird, but so far I hadn't passed out. The heat didn't feel so bad, even though the pavement was turning to sludge at my feet.

Extreme temperatures have never bothered me. I don't know why. Some people are double-jointed. Some people can wiggle their ears. I can sleep outside in the winter without freezing to death or hold matches under my hand without getting burned. I'd won some bets that way in the homeless shelters, but I'd never thought of my tolerance as something special... *magical*. I'd definitely never tested its limits.

I walked through the curtain of fire and smacked Surt in the head with my rusty sword. Because, you know, I always try to keep my promises.

The blade didn't seem to hurt him, but the swirling flames died. Surt stared at me for a millisecond, completely shocked. Then he punched me in the gut.

I'd been punched before, just not by a fiery heavyweight whose ring name was the Black One.

I folded like a deck chair. My vision blurred and tripled. When I regained my focus, I was on my knees, staring at a puddle of regurgitated milk, turkey, and crackers steaming on the asphalt.

Surt could have taken my head off with his fiery sword, but I guess he didn't feel I was worth it. He paced in front of me, making *tsk-tsk* sounds.

"Feeble," he said. "A soft little boy. Give me the blade of your own free will, Vanir-spawn. I promise you a quick death."

*Vanir-spawn?*

I knew a lot of good insults, but I'd never heard that one.

The corroded sword was still in my hand. I felt my pulse against the metal as if the sword itself had developed a heartbeat. Resonating up the blade, all the way to my ears, was a faint hum like a car engine turning over.

*You can renew it, Randolph* had told me.

I could almost believe the old weapon was stirring, waking up. Not fast enough, though. Surt kicked me in the ribs and sent me sprawling.

I lay flat on my back, staring at the smoke in the winter sky. Surt must have kicked me hard enough to trigger a near-death hallucination. A hundred feet up, I saw a girl in armor on a horse made of mist, circling like a vulture over the battle. She held a spear made of pure light. Her chain mail shone like silvered glass. She wore a conical steel helmet over a green head wrap, sort of like a medieval knight. Her face was beautiful but stern. Our eyes met for a fraction of a second.

*If you're real, I thought, help.*

She dissolved into smoke.

"The sword," Surt demanded, his obsidian face looming over me. "It's worth more to me freely surrendered, but if I must, I will pry it from your dead fingers."

In the distance, sirens wailed. I wondered why emergency crews hadn't shown up already. Then I remembered the other two giant explosions in Boston. Had Surt caused them, too? Or brought along some fiery friends?

At the edge of the bridge, Hearth staggered to his feet. A few unconscious pedestrians had started to stir. I couldn't see Randolph and Blitz anywhere. Hopefully they were out of danger by now.

If I could keep Burning Man occupied, maybe the rest of the bystanders would have time to clear out too.

Somehow I managed to stand.

I looked at the sword and...yeah, I was definitely hallucinating.

Instead of a corroded piece of junk, I held an actual weapon. The leather-wrapped grip felt warm and comfortable in my hand. The pommel, a simple polished steel oval, helped counterweight the thirty-inch blade, which was double-edged and rounded at the tip, more for hacking than for stabbing. Down the center of the blade, a wide groove was emblazoned with Viking runes—the same kind I'd seen in Randolph's office. They shimmered in a lighter shade of silver, as if they'd been inlaid while the blade was forged.

The sword was definitely humming now, almost like a human voice trying to find the right pitch.

Surt stepped back. His lava-red eyes flickered nervously. "You don't know what you have there, boy. You won't live long enough to find out."

He swung his scimitar.

I'd had no experience with swords, unless you count watching *The Princess Bride* twenty-six times as a kid. Surt would've cut me in half—but my weapon had other ideas.

Ever held a spinning top on the tip of your finger? You can feel it moving under its own power, tilting in all directions. The sword was like that. It swung itself, blocking Surt's fiery blade. Then it spun in an arc, dragging my arm along with it, and hacked into Surt's right leg.

The Black One screamed. The wound in his thigh smoldered, setting his pants on fire. His blood sizzled and glowed like the flow from a volcano. His fiery blade dissipated.

Before he could recover, my sword leaped upward and slashed his face. With a howl, Surt stumbled back, cupping his hands over his nose.

To my left, someone screamed—the mother with the two kids.

Hearth was trying to help her extract her toddlers from the stroller, which was now smoking and about to combust.

"Hearth!" I yelled, before remembering that was no good.

With Surt still distracted, I limped over to Hearth and pointed down the bridge. "Go! Get the kids out of here!"

He could read lips just fine, but he didn't like my message. He shook his head adamantly, hoisting one of the toddlers into his arms.

The mom was cradling the other kid.

"Leave now," I told her. "My friend will help you."

The mom didn't hesitate. Hearth gave me one last look: *This is not a good idea*. Then he followed her, the little kid bouncing up and down in his

arms crying, “Ah! Ah! Ah!”

Other innocent people were still stuck on the bridge: drivers trapped in their cars, pedestrians wandering around in a daze, their clothes steaming and their skin lobster red. Emergency sirens were closer now, but I didn’t see how the police or paramedics could help if Surt was still storming around being all fiery and stuff.

“Boy!” The Black One sounded like he was gargling with syrup.

He took his hands from his face, and I saw why. My self-guided sword had taken off his nose. Molten blood streamed down his cheeks, splattering on the pavement in sizzling droplets. His pants had burned off, leaving him in a pair of flame-patterned red boxers. Between that and the newly sawed-off snout, he looked like a diabolical version of Porky Pig.

“I have tolerated you long enough,” he gargled.

“I was just thinking the same thing about you.” I raised the sword. “You want this? Come and get it.”

In retrospect, that was a pretty stupid thing to say.

Above me, I caught a glimpse of the weird gray apparition—a girl on a horse, circling like a vulture, watching.

Instead of charging, Surt bent down and scooped asphalt from the road with his bare hands. He molded it into a red-hot sphere of steaming gunk and pitched it toward me like a fastball.

Another game I’m not good at: baseball. I swung the sword, hoping to knock away the projectile. I missed. The asphalt cannonball plowed into my gut and embedded itself—burning, searing, destroying.

I couldn’t breathe. The pain was so intense I felt every cell in my body explode in a chain reaction.

Despite that, a strange sort of calm fell over me: I was dying. I wasn’t coming back from this. Part of me thought, *All right. Make it count.*

My vision dimmed. The sword hummed and tugged at my hand, but I could barely feel my arms.

Surt studied me, a smile on his ruined face.

*He wants the sword, I told myself. He can’t have it. If I’m going out, he’s going with me.*

Weakly, I raised my free hand. I flipped him a gesture that he wouldn’t need to know sign language to understand.

He roared and charged.

Just as he reached me, my sword leaped up and ran him through. I used the last of my strength to grapple him as his momentum carried us both over the railing.

“No!” He fought to free himself, bursting into flames, kicking and gouging, but I held on as we plummeted toward the Charles River, my sword still embedded in his stomach, my own organs burning away from the molten tar in my gut. The sky flashed in and out of view. I caught a glimpse of the smoky apparition—the girl on the horse diving toward me at a full gallop, her hand outstretched.

*FLOOM!* I hit the water.

Then I died. The end.



## Mind the Gap, and Also the Hairy Guy with the Ax

BACK IN SCHOOL, I loved ending stories that way.

It's the perfect conclusion, isn't it? *Billy went to school. He had a good day. Then he died. The end.*

It doesn't leave you hanging. It wraps everything up nice and neat.

Except in my case, it didn't.

Maybe you're thinking, *Oh, Magnus, you didn't really die. Otherwise you couldn't be narrating this story. You just came close. Then you were miraculously rescued, blah, blah, blah.*

Nope. I actually died. One hundred percent: guts impaled, vital organs burned, head smacked into a frozen river from forty feet up, every bone in my body broken, lungs filled with ice water.

The medical term for that is *dead*.

*Gee, Magnus, what did it feel like?*

It hurt. A lot. Thanks for asking.

I started to dream, which was weird—not only because I was dead, but because I never dream. People have tried to argue with me about that. They say everybody dreams and I just don't remember mine. But I'm telling you, I always slept like the dead. Until I *was* dead. Then I dreamed like a normal person.

I was hiking with my mom in the Blue Hills. I was maybe ten years old. It was a warm summer day, with a cool breeze through the pines. We stopped at Houghton's Pond to skip stones across the water. I managed three skips. My mom managed four. She always won. Neither of us cared. She would laugh and hug me and that was enough for me.

It's hard to describe her. To really understand Natalie Chase, you had to meet her. She used to joke that her spirit animal was Tinker Bell from *Peter Pan*. If you can imagine Tinker Bell at age thirty-something, minus the wings, wearing flannel, denim, and Doc Martens, you've got a pretty good picture of my mom. She was a petite lady with delicate features, short blond pixie hair, and leaf-green eyes that sparkled with humor. Whenever she read me stories, I used to gaze at the spray of freckles across her nose and try to count them.

She radiated joy. That's the only way I can put it. She loved life. Her enthusiasm was infectious. She was the kindest, most easygoing person I ever knew...until the weeks leading up to her death.

In the dream, that was still years in the future. We stood together at the pond. She took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of warm pine needles.

"This is where I met your father," she told me. "On a summer day just like this."

The comment surprised me. She rarely talked about my dad. I'd never met him, never even seen pictures of him. That might sound strange, but my mom didn't make a big deal out of their relationship, so neither did I.

She was clear that my dad hadn't abandoned us. He'd just moved on. She wasn't bitter. She had fond memories of their brief time together. After it ended, she found out she was pregnant with me, and she was elated. Ever since, it had been just the two of us. We didn't need anyone else.

"You met him at the pond?" I asked. "Was he good at skipping stones?"

She laughed. "Oh, yeah. He *destroyed* me at stone skipping. That first day...it was perfect. Well, except for one thing." She pulled me close and kissed my forehead. "I didn't have you yet, pumpkin."

Okay, yes. My mom called me *pumpkin*. Go ahead and laugh. As I got older, it embarrassed me, but that was while she was still alive. Now I'd give anything to hear her call me *pumpkin* again.

"What was my dad like?" I asked. It felt strange to say *my dad*. How can somebody be *yours* if you never met him? "What happened to him?"

My mom spread her arms to the sunlight. “That’s why I bring you here, Magnus. Can’t you feel it? He’s all around us.”

I didn’t know what she meant. Usually she didn’t talk in metaphors. My mom was about as literal and down-to-earth as you could get.

She ruffled my hair. “Come on, I’ll race you to the beach.”

My dream shifted. I found myself standing in Uncle Randolph’s library. In front of me, lounging sideways across the desk, was a man I’d never seen before. He was walking his fingers across the collection of old maps.

“Death was an interesting choice, Magnus.”

The man grinned. His clothes looked fresh from the store: blinding white sneakers, crisp new jeans, and a Red Sox home jersey. His feathery hair was a mix of red, brown, and yellow, tousled in a fashionable *I-just-got-out-of-bed-and-I-look-this-good* sort of way. His face was shockingly handsome. He could’ve done ads for aftershave in men’s magazines, but his scars ruined the perfection. Burn tissue splashed across the bridge of his nose and his cheekbones, like impact lines on the moon’s surface. His lips were marred by a row of welts all the way around his mouth—maybe piercing holes that had closed over. But why would anyone have that many mouth piercings?

I wasn’t sure what to say to the scarred hallucination, but since my mom’s words were still lingering in my head, I asked, “Are you my father?”

The hallucination raised his eyebrows. He threw back his head and laughed.

“Oh, I *like* you! We’ll have fun. No, Magnus Chase, I’m not your father, but I’m definitely on your side.” He traced his finger under the Red Sox logo on his jersey. “You’ll meet *my* son soon enough. Until then, a little advice: Don’t trust appearances. Don’t trust your comrades’ motives. Oh, and”—he lunged forward and grabbed my wrist—“tell the All-Father I said hello.”

I tried to break free. His grip was like steel. The dream changed. Suddenly I was flying through cold gray fog.

“Stop struggling!” said a female voice.

Holding my wrist was the girl I’d seen circling the bridge. She charged through the air on her nebulous horse, pulling me along at her side like I was a sack of laundry. Her blazing spear was strapped across her back. Her chain mail armor glinted in the gray light.

She tightened her grip. “Do you *want* to fall into the Gap?”

I got a feeling she wasn't talking about the clothing store. Looking below me, I saw nothing—just endless gray. I decided I did not want to fall into it.

I tried to speak. I couldn't. I shook my head weakly.

"Then stop struggling," she ordered.

Beneath her helmet, a few wisps of dark hair had escaped her green headscarf. Her eyes were the color of redwood bark.

"Don't make me regret this," she said.

My consciousness faded.

I awoke gasping, every muscle in my body tingling with alarm.

I sat up and grabbed my gut, expecting to find a burning hole where my intestines used to be. No smoldering asphalt was embedded there. I felt no pain. The strange sword was gone. My clothes looked perfectly fine—not wet or burned or torn.

In fact, my clothes looked *too* fine. The same stuff I'd been wearing for weeks—my only pair of jeans, my layers of shirts, my jacket—didn't smell. They'd seemingly been washed, dried, and put back on me while I was unconscious, which was an unsettling idea. They even had a warm lemony scent that reminded me of the good old days when my mom did my laundry. My shoes were like new, as shiny as when I dug them out of the Dumpster behind Marathon Sports.

Even weirder: *I* was clean. My hands weren't caked with grime. My skin felt freshly scrubbed. I ran my fingers through my hair and found no tangles, no twigs, no pieces of litter.

Slowly I got to my feet. There wasn't a scratch on me. I bounced on my heels. I felt like I could run a mile. I breathed in the smell of chimney fires and an approaching snowstorm. I almost laughed with relief. Somehow I'd survived!

Except...that wasn't possible.

Where was I?

Gradually my senses expanded. I was standing in the entry courtyard of an opulent town house, the kind you might see on Beacon Hill—eight stories of imposing white limestone and gray marble jutting into the winter sky. The double front doors were dark heavy wood bound with iron. In the center of each was a life-size wolf's-head doorknocker.

Wolves...that alone was enough to make me hate the place.

I turned to look for a street exit. There wasn't one, just a fifteen-foot-tall white limestone wall surrounding the courtyard. How could you not have a front gate?

I couldn't see much over the wall, but I was obviously still in Boston. I recognized some of the surrounding buildings. In the distance rose the towers of Downtown Crossing. I was probably on Beacon Street, just across from the Common. But how had I gotten here?

In one corner of the courtyard stood a tall birch tree with pure white bark. I thought about climbing it to get over the wall, but the lowest branches were out of reach. Then I realized the tree was in full leaf, which shouldn't have been possible in the winter. Not only that: its leaves glittered gold as if someone had painted them with twenty-four-karat gilt.

Next to the tree, a bronze plaque was affixed to the wall. I hadn't really noticed it earlier, since half the buildings in Boston had historic markers, but now I looked closer. The inscriptions were in two languages. One was the Norse alphabet I'd seen earlier. The other was English:

WELCOME TO THE GROVE OF GLASIR.

NO SOLICITING. NO LOITERING.

HOTEL DELIVERIES: PLEASE USE THE NIFLHEIM ENTRANCE.

Okay...I'd exceeded my daily quota of bizarre. I had to get out of here. I had to get over that wall, find out what had happened to Blitz and Hearth—and maybe Uncle Randolph if I was feeling generous—then possibly hitchhike to Guatemala. I was *done* with this town.

Then the double doors swung inward with a groan. Blinding golden light spilled out.

A burly man appeared on the stoop. He wore a doorman's uniform: top hat, white gloves, and a dark green jacket with tails and the interlocking letters HV embroidered on the lapel, but there was no way this guy was an actual doorman. His warty face was smeared with ashes. His beard hadn't been trimmed in decades. His eyes were bloodshot and murderous, and a double-bladed ax hung at his side. His name tag read: HUNDING, SAXONY, VALUED TEAM MEMBER SINCE 749 C.E.

"S-s-sorry," I stammered. "I must...um, wrong house."

The man scowled. He shuffled closer and sniffed me. He smelled like turpentine and burning meat. “Wrong house? I don’t think so. You’re checking in.”

“Uh...what?”

“You’re dead, aren’t you?” the man said. “Follow me. I’ll show you to registration.”



## You Totally Want the Minibar Key

WOULD IT SURPRISE you to learn that the place was bigger on the inside?

The foyer alone could've been the world's largest hunting lodge—a space twice as big as the mansion appeared on the outside. An acre of hardwood floor was covered with exotic animal skins: zebra, lion, and a forty-foot-long reptile that I wouldn't want to have met when it was alive. Against the right wall, a fire crackled in a bedroom-size hearth. In front of it, a few high-school-age guys in fluffy green bathrobes lounged on overstuffed leather couches, laughing and drinking from silver goblets. Over the mantel hung the stuffed head of a wolf.

*Oh, joy, I thought with a shudder. More wolves.*

Columns made from rough-hewn tree trunks held up the ceiling, which was lined with spears for rafters. Polished shields gleamed on the walls. Light seemed to radiate from everywhere—a warm golden glow that hurt my eyes like a summer afternoon after a dark theater.

In the middle of the foyer, a freestanding display board announced:

### TODAY'S ACTIVITIES

SINGLE COMBAT TO THE DEATH!—OSLO ROOM, 10 A.M.

GROUP COMBAT TO THE DEATH!—STOCKHOLM ROOM, 11 A.M.

BUFFET LUNCH TO THE DEATH!—DINING HALL, 12 P.M.  
FULL ARMY COMBAT TO THE DEATH!—MAIN COURTYARD, 1 P.M.  
BIKRAM YOGA TO THE DEATH!—COPENHAGEN ROOM, BRING YOUR OWN MAT, 4  
P.M.

The doorman Hunding said something, but my head was ringing so badly I missed it.

“Sorry,” I said, “what?”

“Luggage,” he repeated. “Do you have any?”

“Um...” I reached for my shoulder strap. My backpack had apparently not been resurrected with me. “No.”

Hunding grunted. “No one brings luggage anymore. Don’t they put *anything* on your funeral pyre?”

“My what?”

“Never mind.” He scowled toward the far corner of the room, where an overturned boat’s keel served as the reception desk. “Guess there’s no putting it off. Come on.”

The man behind the keel apparently used the same barber as Hunding. His beard was so big it had its own zip code. His hair looked like a buzzard that had exploded on a windshield. He was dressed in a forest green pinstriped suit. His name tag read: HELGI, MANAGER, EAST GOTHLAND, VALUED TEAM MEMBER SINCE 749 C.E.

“Welcome!” Helgi glanced up from his computer screen. “Checking in?”

“Uh—”

“You realize check-in time is three P.M.,” he said. “If you die earlier in the day, I can’t guarantee your room will be ready.”

“I can just go back to being alive,” I offered.

“No, no.” He tapped on his keyboard. “Ah, here we are.” He grinned, revealing exactly three teeth. “We’ve upgraded you to a suite.”

Next to me, Hunding muttered under his breath, “Everyone is upgraded to a suite. All we *have* are suites.”

“Hunding...” warned the manager.

“Sorry, sir.”

“You don’t want me to use the stick.”

Hunding winced. “No, sir.”

I looked back and forth between them, checking their name tags.

“You guys started working here the same year,” I noted. “749...what is C.E.?”

“Common Era,” said the manager. “What you might call A.D.”

“Then why don’t you just say A.D.?”

“Because Anno Domini, *in the Year of Our Lord*, is fine for Christians, but Thor gets a little upset. He still holds a grudge that Jesus never showed up for that duel he challenged him to.”

“Say what now?”

“It’s not important,” Helgi said. “How many keys would you like? Is one sufficient?”

“I still don’t get where I am. If you guys have been here since 749, that’s over a thousand years.”

“Don’t remind me,” Hunding grumbled.

“But that’s impossible. And...and you said I’m dead? I don’t feel dead. I feel fine.”

“Sir,” Helgi said, “all this will be explained tonight at dinner. That’s when new guests are formally welcomed.”

“Valhalla.” The word surfaced from the depths of my brain—a half-remembered story my mom had read me when I was little. “The HV on your lapel. The V stands for *Valhalla*?”

Helgi’s eyes made it clear I was straining his patience. “Yes, sir. The Hotel Valhalla. Congratulations. You’ve been chosen to join the hosts of Odin. I look forward to hearing about your brave exploits at dinner.”

My legs buckled. I leaned on the desk for support. I’d been trying to convince myself this was all a mistake—some elaborate theme hotel where I’d been mistaken for a guest. Now I wasn’t so sure.

“Dead,” I mumbled. “You mean I’m actually...I’m actually—”

“Here is your room key.” Helgi handed me a stone engraved with a single Viking rune, like the stones in Uncle Randolph’s library. “Would you like the minibar key?”

“Uh—”

“He wants the minibar key,” Hunding answered for me. “Kid, you want the minibar key. It’s going to be a long stay.”

My mouth tasted like copper. “How long?”

“Forever,” Helgi said, “or at least until Ragnarok. Hunding will now show you to your room. Enjoy your afterlife. Next!”



## My Room Does Not Suck

I WASN'T PAYING the closest attention as Hunding guided me through the hotel. I felt as if I'd been spun around fifty times then released into the middle of a circus and told to have fun.

Each hall we walked through seemed bigger than the one before. Most of the hotel guests looked like they were in high school, though some looked slightly older. Guys and girls sat together in small groups, lounging in front of fireplaces, chatting in many different languages, eating snacks or playing board games like chess and Scrabble and something that involved real daggers and a blowtorch. Peeking into side lounges, I spotted pool tables, pinball machines, an old-fashioned video arcade, and something that looked like an iron maiden from a torture chamber.

Staff members in dark green shirts moved among the guests, bringing platters of food and pitchers of drink. As far as I could tell, all the servers were buff female warriors with shields on their backs and swords or axes on their belts, which is not something you see a lot in the service industry.

One heavily armed waitress passed me with a steaming plate of egg rolls. My stomach rumbled.

"How can I be hungry if I'm dead?" I asked Hunding. "*None* of these people look dead."

Hunding shrugged. “Well, there’s dead and then there’s dead. Think of Valhalla more like...an upgrade. You’re one of the *einherjar* now.”

He pronounced the word like *in-HAIR-yar*.

“Einherjar,” I repeated. “Just rolls right off the tongue.”

“Yeah. Singular: *einherji*.” He said it like *in-HAIR-yee*. “We’re the chosen of Odin, soldiers in his eternal army. The word *einherjar* is usually translated as *lone warriors*, but that doesn’t really capture the meaning. It’s more like...the *once warriors*—the warriors who fought bravely in the last life and will fight bravely again on the Day of Doom. Duck.”

“The Day of Doom Duck?”

“No, duck!”

Hunding pushed me down as a spear flew past. It impaled a guy sitting on the nearest sofa, killing him instantly. Drinks, dice, and Monopoly money flew everywhere. The people he’d been playing with rose to their feet, looking mildly annoyed, and glared in the direction the spear had come from.

“I saw that, John Red Hand!” Hunding yelled. “The lounge is a *No Impaling* area!”

From the billiard room, somebody laughed and called back in... Swedish? He didn’t sound very remorseful.

“Anyway.” Hunding resumed walking as if nothing had happened. “The elevators are right over here.”

“Wait,” I said. “That guy was just murdered with a spear. Aren’t you going to *do* anything?”

“Oh, the wolves will clean up.”

My pulse went into double time. “Wolves?”

Sure enough, while the other Monopoly players were sorting their pieces, a pair of gray wolves bounded into the lounge, grabbed the dead man by his legs, and dragged him away, the spear still sticking out of his chest. The trail of blood evaporated instantly. The perforated sofa mended itself.

I cowered behind the nearest potted plant. I don’t care how that sounds. My fear simply took control. These wolves didn’t have glowing blue eyes like the animals that had attacked my apartment, but still I wished I’d ended up in an afterlife where the mascot was a gerbil.

“Aren’t there any rules against killing?” I asked in a small voice.

Hunding raised a bushy eyebrow. “That was just a bit of fun, boy. The victim will be fine by dinner.” He pulled me out of my hiding place. “Come on.”

Before I could ask more about the “bit of fun,” we reached an elevator. Its cage door was made out of spears. Overlapping gold shields lined the walls. The control panel had so many buttons, it stretched from floor to ceiling. The highest number was 540. Hunding pressed 19.

“How can this place have five hundred and forty floors?” I said. “It would be the tallest building in the world.”

“If it only existed in one world, yes. But it connects with all the Nine Worlds. You just came through the Midgard entrance. Most mortals do.”

“Midgard...” I vaguely remembered something about the Vikings believing in nine different worlds. Randolph had used the term *worlds* too. But it had been a long time since my mom read me those Norse bedtime stories. “You mean, like, the world of humans.”

“Aye.” Hunding took a breath and recited, *“Five hundred and forty floors has Valhalla; five hundred and forty doors leading out into the Nine Worlds.”* He grinned. “You never know when or where we’ll have to march off to war.”

“How often has that happened?”

“Well, never. But still...it could happen at any time. I, for one, can’t wait! Finally, Helgi will have to stop punishing me.”

“The manager? What’s he punishing you for?”

Hunding’s expression soured. “Long story. He and I—”

The elevator’s spear-cage door rolled open.

“Forget it.” Hunding clapped me on the back. “You’ll like floor nineteen. Good hallmates!”

I’d always thought of hotel corridors as dark, depressing, and claustrophobic. Floor nineteen? Not so much. The vaulted ceiling was twenty feet tall, lined with—you guessed it—more spears for rafters. Valhalla had apparently gotten a good deal at the Spear Wholesale Warehouse. Torches burned in iron sconces, but they didn’t seem to make any smoke. They just cast warm orange light across the wall displays of swords, shields, and tapestries. The hall was so wide you could’ve played a regulation soccer game, no problem. The bloodred carpet had tree branch designs that moved as if swaying in the wind.

Set about fifty feet apart, each guest room door was roughhewn oak bound in iron. I didn't see any doorknobs or locks. In the center of each door, a plate-size iron circle was inscribed with a name surrounded by a ring of Viking runes.

The first read HALFBORN GUNDERSON. Behind that door I heard shouting and metal clanging like a sword fight was in progress.

The next read MALLORY KEEN. Behind that door, silence.

Then: THOMAS JEFFERSON, JR. The popping of gunfire came from inside, though it sounded more like a video game than the actual thing. (Yes, I've heard both.)

The fourth door was simply marked x. In front, a room-service cart sat in the hallway with the severed head of a pig on a silver platter. The pig's ears and nose looked slightly nibbled.

Now, I'm not a food critic. Being homeless, I could never afford to be. But I draw the line at pig heads.

We'd almost reached the T at the end of the hall when a large black bird shot around the corner and zipped past me, almost clipping my ear. I watched the bird disappear down the hall—a raven, with a notepad and a pen in its talons.

"What was that?" I asked.

"A raven," Hunding said, which I found very helpful.

Finally we stopped at a door inscribed MAGNUS CHASE.

Seeing my name written in iron, inscribed with runes, I started to tremble. My last hope that this might be a mistake, birthday prank, or cosmic mix-up finally evaporated. The hotel was expecting me. They'd spelled my name right and everything.

For the record, Magnus means *great*. My mom named me that because our family was descended from Swedish kings or something a billion years ago. Also, she said I was the greatest thing that ever happened to her. I know. One, two, three: *Awwwww*. It was an annoying name to have. People tended to spell it Mangus, rhymes with Angus. I always corrected them: *No, it's Magnus, rhymes with swag-ness*. At which point they would stare at me blankly.

Anyway, there was my name on the door. Once I went through, I would be checked in. According to the manager, I'd have a new home until doomsday.

“Go ahead.” Hunding pointed at the runestone key in my hand. The symbol looked sort of like an infinity sign or a sideways hourglass:



“It’s *dagaz*,” Hunding said. “Nothing to be afraid of. It symbolizes new beginnings, transformations. It also opens your door. Only you have access.”

I swallowed. “What if, for instance, the staff wants to get in?”

“Oh, we use the staff key.” Hunding patted the ax on his belt. I couldn’t tell if he was kidding.

I held up the runestone. I didn’t want to try it, but I also didn’t want to stay in the hallway until I got impaled by a random spear or injured by a raven hit-and-run. Instinctively, I touched the stone to the matching dagaz mark on the door. The ring of runes glowed green. The door swung open.

I stepped inside, and my jaw hit the floor.

The suite was nicer than any place I’d ever lived, nicer than any place I’d ever visited, including Uncle Randolph’s mansion.

In a trance, I moved to the middle of the suite, where a central atrium was open to the sky. My shoes sank into the thick green grass. Four large oak trees ringed the garden like pillars. The lower branches spread into the room across the ceiling, interweaving with the rafters. The taller branches grew up through the opening of the atrium, making a lacy canopy. Sunlight warmed my face. A pleasant breeze wafted through the room, bringing the smell of jasmine.

“How?” I stared at Hunding. “Hundreds of floors are above us, but that’s open sky. And it’s the middle of winter. How can it feel sunny and warm?”

Hunding shrugged. “I don’t know—magic. But this is *your* afterlife, boy. You’ve earned some perks, eh?”

Had I? I didn’t feel particularly perk-worthy.

I turned in a slow circle. The suite was shaped like a cross, with four sections radiating from the central atrium. Each wing was as large as my old apartment. One was the entry hall where we’d come in. The next was a bedroom with a king-size bed. Despite its size, the room was spare and simple: a beige comforter and fluffy-looking pillows on the bed, beige walls

with no artwork or mirrors or other decoration. Heavy brown curtains could be drawn to close off the space.

I remembered when I was a kid, how my mom used to make my room as no-frills as possible. I'd always found it hard to sleep indoors unless I had total darkness and nothing to distract me. Looking at this bedroom, I felt like somebody had reached into my mind and pulled out exactly what I needed to be comfortable.

The wing to the left was a dressing area/bathroom tiled in black and beige, my favorite colors. The perks included a sauna, a hot tub, a walk-in closet, a walk-in shower, and a walk-in toilet. (Just kidding on that last one, but it *was* a fancy throne, suitable for the honored dead.)

The suite's fourth wing was a full kitchen and living room. At one end of the living room, a big leather couch faced a plasma-screen TV with about six different game systems stacked in the media cabinet. On the other side, two recliners sat in front of a crackling fireplace and a wall of books.

Yes, I like to read. I'm weird that way. Even after dropping out of school, I spent a lot of time in the Boston Public Library, learning random stuff just to pass the time in a warm, safe place. For two years I had missed my old book collection; I never seriously thought I would have one again.

I walked over to check out the titles on the shelves. Then I noticed the picture framed in silver on the fireplace mantel.

Something like a bubble of helium made its way up my esophagus. "No way..."

I picked up the photo. It showed me, at age eight, and my mom at the summit of Mount Washington in New Hampshire. That had been one of the best trips of my life. We'd asked a park ranger to take the photo. In the shot, I was grinning (which I don't do much anymore), showing off my missing two front teeth. My mom knelt behind me with her arms wrapped around my chest, her green eyes crinkling at the corners, her freckles dark from the sun, her blond hair swept sideways by the wind.

"This is impossible," I murmured. "There was only one copy of this picture. It burned in the fire..." I turned to Hunding, who was wiping his eyes. "You okay?"

He cleared his throat. "Fine! Of course I'm fine. The hotel likes to provide you with keepsakes, reminders of your old life. Photographs..." Under his beard, his mouth might have been quivering. "Back when I died, they didn't have photographs. It's just...you're lucky."

No one had called me *lucky* in a very long time. The idea shook me out of my daze. I'd been without my mom for two years. I'd been dead, or *upgraded*, for only a few hours. This bellhop from Saxony had been here since 749 C.E. I wondered how he had died, and what family he'd left behind. Twelve hundred years later, he was still getting teary-eyed about them, which seemed like a cruel way to spend an afterlife.

Hunding straightened and wiped his nose. "Enough of that! If you have any questions, call the front desk. I look forward to hearing about your brave exploits tonight at dinner."

"My...brave exploits?"

"Now, don't be modest. You wouldn't have been chosen unless you did something heroic."

"But—"

"Been a pleasure serving you, sir, and welcome to the Hotel Valhalla."

He held out his palm. It took me a second to realize he wanted a tip.

"Oh, um..." I dug into my jacket pockets, not expecting to find anything. Miraculously, the chocolate bar I'd swiped from Uncle Randolph's house was still there, undamaged from its trip through the Great Beyond. I gave it to Hunding. "Sorry, that's all I have."

His eyes turned the size of drink coasters. "Gods of Asgard! Thank you, kid!" He sniffed the chocolate and held it up like a holy chalice. "Wow! Okay, you need anything, you let me know. Your Valkyrie will come get you right before dinner. Wow!"

"My Valkyrie? Wait. I don't have a Valkyrie."

Hunding laughed, his eyes still fixed on the chocolate bar. "Yeah, if I had *your* Valkyrie, I'd say the same thing. She's caused her share of trouble."

"What do mean?"

"See you tonight, kid!" Hunding headed for the door. "I got things to eat—I mean *do*. Try not to kill yourself before dinner!"



## Pleased to Meet You. I Will Now Crush Your Windpipe

### I COLLAPSED ON THE GRASS.

Gazing up through the tree branches at the blue sky, I had trouble breathing. I hadn't had an asthma attack in years, but I remembered all the nights my mom had held me while I wheezed, feeling like an invisible belt was tightening around my chest. Maybe you're wondering why my mom would take me camping and climbing mountains if I had asthma, but being outside always helped.

Lying in the middle of the atrium, I breathed in the fresh air and hoped my lungs would settle down.

Unfortunately, I was pretty sure this wasn't an asthma attack. This was a complete nervous breakdown. What shook me wasn't just the fact that I was dead, stuck in a bizarre Viking afterlife where people ordered pig heads from the room service menu and impaled each other in the lobby.

The way my life had gone so far, I could accept that. Of course I'd end up in Valhalla on my sixteenth birthday. Just my luck.

What really hit me: for the first time since my mom died, I was in a comfortable place, alone and safe (as far as I could tell at the moment). Shelters didn't count. Soup kitchens and rooftops and sleeping bags under

bridges didn't count. I'd always slept with one eye open. I could never relax. Now, I was free to think.

And thinking wasn't a good thing.

I'd never had the luxury of grieving properly for my mom. I'd never had time to sit and feel sorry for myself. In a way, that had been as helpful to me as the survival skills my mom had taught me—how to navigate, how to camp, how to make a fire.

All those trips to the parks, the mountains, the lakes. As long as her old beat-up Subaru was working, we'd spend every weekend out of town, exploring the wilderness.

*What are we running from?* I asked her one Friday, a few months before she died. I was annoyed. I wanted to crash at home for once. I didn't understand her frantic rush to pack and leave.

She'd smiled, but she seemed more preoccupied than usual. *We have to make the most of our time, Magnus.*

Had my mom been deliberately preparing me to survive on my own? Almost as if she'd known what would happen to her...but that wasn't possible. Then again, having a Norse god for a dad wasn't possible either.

My breathing still rattled, but I got up and paced around my new room. In the photo on the mantel, eight-year-old Magnus grinned at me with his tangled hair and his missing teeth. That kid was so clueless, so unappreciative of what he had.

I scanned the bookshelves: my favorite fantasy and horror authors from when I was younger—Stephen King, Darren Shan, Neal Shusterman, Michael Grant, Joe Hill; my favorite graphic novel series—Scott Pilgrim, Sandman, Watchmen, Saga; plus a lot of books I'd been meaning to read at the library. (Pro homeless tip: public libraries are safe havens. They have bathrooms. They hardly ever kick out kids who are reading as long as you don't smell too bad or cause a scene.)

I pulled down the illustrated children's book of Norse myths my mom read to me when I was little. Inside were simplistic pictures of happy smiling Viking gods, rainbows, flowers, and pretty girls with blond hair. And sentences like *The gods dwelt in a wonderful and beautiful realm!* There was nothing about the Black One Surt who burned baby carriages and threw molten asphalt, nothing about wolves that murdered people's mothers and made apartments explode. That made me angry.

On the coffee table was a leather-bound notebook titled GUEST SERVICES. I flipped through it. The room service menu went on for ten pages. The TV channel list was almost as long, and the hotel map was so convoluted, divided into so many subsections, I couldn't make sense of it. There were no clearly marked emergency doors labeled: EXIT HERE TO RETURN TO YOUR OLD LIFE!

I threw the guest services book into the fireplace.

As it burned, a new copy appeared on the coffee table. Stupid magical hotel wouldn't even allow me to properly vandalize things.

In a rage, I flipped the sofa. I didn't expect it to go far, but it cartwheeled across the room and smashed into the far wall.

I stared at the trail of dislodged cushions, the upside-down sofa, the cracked plaster and leather skid marks on the wall. How had I done that?

The sofa didn't magically right itself. It stayed where I'd thrown it. The anger drained out of me. I'd probably just made extra work for some poor staff member like Hunding. That didn't seem fair.

I paced some more, thinking about the dark fiery guy on the bridge and why he'd wanted the sword. I hoped Surt had died with me—more *permanently* than I had—but I wasn't optimistic. As long as Blitz and Hearth had gotten away safely. (Oh, yeah. Randolph, too, I guess.)

And the sword itself...where was it? Back on the river bottom? Valhalla could resurrect me with a chocolate bar in my pocket, but not a sword in my hand. That was messed up.

In the old stories, Valhalla was for heroes who died in battle. I remembered that much. I definitely didn't feel like a hero. I'd gotten my butt kicked and my guts cannonballed. By stabbing Surt and toppling off the bridge, I'd simply failed in the most productive way possible. A brave death? Not so much.

I froze.

An idea struck me with the force of a sledgehammer.

My mom...If anyone had died bravely, *she* had. To protect me from—  
Just then someone knocked on my door.

It swung open and a girl stepped inside...the same girl who had circled over the battle on the bridge, then pulled me through the gray void.

She had ditched her helmet, chain mail, and glowing spear. Her green headscarf was now around her neck, letting her long brown hair spill freely over her shoulders. Her white dress was embroidered with Viking runes

around the collar and cuffs. From her golden belt hung a set of old-fashioned keys and a single-bladed ax. She looked like the maid of honor at someone's Mortal Kombat wedding.

She glanced at the overturned sofa. "Did the furniture offend you?"

"You're real," I noted.

She patted her own arms. "Yes, it appears I am."

"My mother," I said.

"No," she said, "I'm not your mother."

"I mean, is she here in Valhalla?"

The girl's mouth formed a silent *Oh*. She gazed over my shoulder as if considering her answer. "I'm sorry. Natalie Chase is not among the Chosen."

"But *she* was the brave one. She sacrificed herself for me."

"I believe you." The girl examined her key ring. "But I would know if she were here. We Valkyries are not allowed to choose everyone who dies bravely. There are...many factors, many different afterlives."

"Then where is she? I want to be there. I'm no hero!"

She surged toward me, pushing me against the wall as easily as I'd flipped the sofa. She pressed her forearm against my throat.

"Don't say that," the girl hissed. "DO—NOT—SAY—THAT!  
Especially not tonight at dinner."

Her breath smelled like spearmint. Her eyes were somehow dark and bright at the same time. They reminded me of a fossil my mom used to have—a cross section of a nautilus-like sea animal called an ammonite. It seemed to glow from within, as if it had absorbed millions of years of memories while lying under the earth. The girl's eyes had that same sort of luster.

"You don't understand," I croaked. "I have to—"

She pushed harder against my windpipe. "What do you think I don't understand? Grieving for your mother? Being judged unfairly? Being somewhere you don't want to be, forced to deal with people you'd rather not deal with?"

I didn't know how to respond to that, especially since I couldn't breathe.

She stepped away. As I choked and gagged, she paced the foyer, glaring at nothing in particular. Her ax and keys swung on her belt.

I rubbed my bruised neck.

*Stupid, Magnus, I told myself. New place: learn the rules.*

I couldn't start whining and making demands. I had to set aside the question of my mother. If she were anywhere, I'd figure that out later. Right now, being in this hotel was no different than walking into an unfamiliar youth shelter, alley encampment, or church basement soup kitchen. Every place had rules. I had to learn the power structure, the pecking order, the no-nos that would get me stabbed or rolled. I had to survive...even if I was already dead.

"Sorry," I said. My throat felt like I'd swallowed a live rodent with lots of claws. "But why do you care if I'm a hero or not?"

She smacked her forehead. "Wow, okay. Maybe because I *brought* you here? Maybe because my career is on the line? One more slipup and—" She caught herself. "Never mind. When you're introduced, go along with what I say. Keep your mouth shut, nod your head, and try to look brave. Don't make me regret bringing you here."

"All right. But for the record, I didn't ask for your help."

"Odin's Eye! You were *dying*! Your other options were Helheim or Ginnungagap or..." She shuddered. "Let's just say there are worse places to spend your afterlife in than Valhalla. I saw what you did on the bridge. Whether you recognize it or not, you acted bravely. You sacrificed yourself to save a lot of people."

Her words sounded like a compliment. Her tone sounded like she was calling me an idiot.

She marched over and poked me in the chest. "You have potential, Magnus Chase. *Don't* prove me wrong or—"

From the wall speakers, a horn blast sounded so loudly it rattled the picture on the mantel.

"What's that?" I asked. "An air raid?"

"Dinner." The girl straightened. She took a deep breath and extended her hand. "Let's start again. Hi, I'm Samirah al-Abbas."

I blinked. "Don't take this the wrong way, but that doesn't sound like a very Viking-ish name."

She smiled tightly. "You can call me Sam. Everyone does. I'll be your Valkyrie this evening. Pleased to meet you properly."

She shook my hand, her grip so tight my finger bones popped. "I will now escort you to dinner." She forced a smile. "If you embarrass me, I'll be the first to kill you."



## At Least I'm Not on Goat-Chasing Duty

IN THE HALLWAY, my neighbors were starting to emerge. Thomas Jefferson, Jr. looked about my age. He had short curly hair, a lanky frame, and a rifle slung over one shoulder. His blue woolen coat had brass buttons and chevrons on the sleeve—a U.S. Army Civil War uniform, I guessed. He nodded and smiled. “How you doing?”

“Um, dead, apparently,” I said.

He laughed. “Yeah. You’ll get used to it. Call me T.J.”

“Magnus,” I said.

“Come on.” Sam pulled me along.

We passed a girl who must’ve been Mallory Keen. She had frizzy red hair, green eyes, and a serrated knife, which she was shaking in the face of a six-foot-seven guy outside the door marked x.

“Again with the pig’s head?” Mallory Keen spoke in a faint Irish brogue. “X, do you think I want to see a severed pig’s head every time I step out my front door?”

“I could not eat anymore,” X rumbled. “The pig head does not fit in my refrigerator.”

Personally, I would not have antagonized the guy. He was built like a bomb containment chamber. If you happened to have a live grenade, I was pretty sure you could safely dispose of it simply by asking X to swallow it.

His skin was the color of a shark's belly, rippling with muscles and stippled with warts. There were so many welts on his face it was hard to tell which one was his nose.

We walked past, X and Mallory too busy arguing to pay us any attention.

When we were out of earshot, I asked Sam, "What's the deal with the big gray dude?"

Sam put her finger to her lips. "X is a half-troll. He's a little sensitive about that."

"A half-troll. That's an actual thing?"

"Of course," she said. "And he deserves to be here as much as you."

"Hey, no doubt. Just asking."

The defensiveness in her voice made me wonder what the story was.

As we passed the door for HALFBORN GUNDERSON, an ax blade split the wood from the inside. Muffled laughter came from the room.

Sam ushered me onto the elevator. She pushed away several other einherjar who were trying to get on. "Next car, guys."

The spear-cage door slid shut. Sam inserted one of her keys into an override slot on the panel. She pressed a red rune and the elevator descended. "I'll take you into the dining hall before the main doors open. That way you can get the lay of the land."

"Uh...sure. Thanks."

Nordic easy listening music started playing from the ceiling.

*Congratulations, Magnus! I thought. Welcome to warrior paradise, where you can listen to Frank Sinatra in Norwegian FOREVER!*

I tried to think of something to say, preferably something that would not make Sam crush my windpipe.

"So...everybody on floor nineteen looks about my age," I noted. "Or—our age. Does Valhalla only take teenagers?"

Samirah shook her head. "The einherjar are grouped by the age they were when they died. You're in the youngest tier, which goes up to about age nineteen. Most of the time, you won't even see the other two tiers—adults and seniors. It's better that way. The adults...well, they don't take teens seriously, even if the teens have been here hundreds of years longer."

"Typical," I said.

"As for the senior warriors, they don't always mix well. Imagine a really violent retirement home."

“Sounds like some shelters I’ve been in.”

“Shelters?”

“Forget it. So you’re a Valkyrie. You chose all the people in the hotel?”

“Yes,” she said. “I personally chose everyone in this hotel.”

“Ha, ha. You know what I meant. Your...sisterhood or whatever.”

“That’s right. Valkyries are responsible for choosing the einherjar. Each warrior here died a valiant death. Each had a belief in honor, or some connection to the Norse gods that made him or her eligible for Valhalla.”

I thought about what Uncle Randolph had told me, how the sword had been a birthright from my father. “A connection...like being the child of a god?”

I was afraid Sam might laugh at me, but she nodded gravely. “Many einherjar are demigods. Many are regular mortals. You’re chosen for Valhalla because of your courage and honor, not your heritage. At least, that’s how it’s supposed to be....”

I couldn’t decide if her tone was wistful or resentful.

“And you?” I asked. “How did you become a Valkyrie? Did you die a noble death?”

She laughed. “Not yet. I’m still among the living.”

“How does that work exactly?”

“Well, I live a double life. Tonight, I’ll escort you to dinner. Then I have to rush home and finish my calculus homework.”

“You’re not joking, are you?”

“I never joke about calculus homework.”

The elevator doors opened. We stepped into a room the size of a concert arena.

My mouth dropped. “Holy—”

“Welcome,” Samirah said, “to the Feast Hall of the Slain.”

Tiers of long tables like stadium seating curved downward from the nosebleed section. In the center of the room, instead of a basketball court, a tree rose taller than the Statue of Liberty. Its lowest branches were maybe a hundred feet up. Its canopy spread over the entire hall, scraping against the domed ceiling and sprouting through a massive opening at the top. Above, stars glittered in the night sky.

My first question probably wasn’t the most important. “Why is there a goat in the tree?”

In fact, a lot of animals skittered among the branches. I couldn't tell what most of them were, but wobbling along the lowest branch was a very fat shaggy goat. Its swollen udders rained milk like leaky showerheads. Below, on the dining-hall floor, a team of four stocky warriors carried a big golden bucket on poles set across their shoulders. They shuffled back and forth, trying to stay under the goat so they could catch the streams of milk. Judging by how soaked the warriors were, they missed a lot.

"The goat is Heidrun," Sam told me. "Her milk is brewed to make the mead of Valhalla. It's good stuff. You'll see."

"And the guys chasing her around?"

"Yeah, that's a thankless job. Behave yourself, or you might get assigned to vat duty."

"Uh...couldn't they just, I don't know, bring the goat down here?"

"She's a free-range goat. Her mead tastes better that way."

"Of course it does," I said. "And...all the other animals? I see squirrels and possums and—"

"Sugar gliders and sloths," Sam offered. "Those are cute."

"Okay. But you guys eat dinner here? That can't be hygienic with all the animal droppings."

"The animals in the Tree of Laeradr are well-behaved."

"The Tree of...Lay-rah-dur. You named your tree."

"Most important things have names." She frowned at me. "Who are you again?"

"Very funny."

"Some of the animals are immortal and have particular jobs. I can't spot him right now, but somewhere up there is a stag named Eikthrymir. We call him Ike for short. You see that waterfall?"

It was hard to miss. From somewhere high in the tree, water ran down grooves in the bark and formed one powerful torrent that cascaded off a branch in a roaring white curtain. It crashed into a pond the size of an Olympic pool between two of the tree's roots.

"The stag's horns spray water nonstop," Sam said. "It flows down the branches into that lake. From there, it goes underground and feeds every river in every world."

"So...*all* water is stag-horn runoff? I'm pretty sure that's not what they taught me in earth science."

“It’s not all from Ike’s horns. There’s also snowmelt, rainwater, pollutants, and trace amounts of fluoride and jotun spit.”

“*Jotun?*”

“You know, giants.”

She didn’t appear to be kidding, though it was hard to be sure. Her face was full of tense humor—her eyes darting and alert, her lips pressed together like she was either suppressing a laugh or expecting an attack. I could imagine her doing stand-up comedy, though maybe not with the ax at her side. Her features also seemed strangely familiar—the line of her nose, the curve of her jaw, the subtle streaks of red and copper in her dark hair.

“Have we met before?” I asked. “I mean...before you chose my soul for Valhalla?”

“I doubt it,” she said.

“But you’re mortal? You live in Boston?”

“Dorchester. I’m a sophomore at King Academy. I live with my grandparents and spend most of my time finding excuses to cover for my Valkyrie activities. Tonight, Jid and Bibi think I’m tutoring a group of elementary students in math. Any other questions?”

Her eyes sent the opposite message: *Enough with the personal stuff.*

I wondered why she lived with her grandparents. Then I remembered what she’d said earlier, about understanding what it was like to grieve for a mother.

“No more questions,” I decided. “My head would explode.”

“That would be messy,” Sam said. “Let’s get your seat before—”

Around the perimeter of the room, a hundred doors burst open. The armies of Valhalla swarmed in.

“Dinner is served,” Sam said.



## Phil the Potato Meets His Doom

WE WERE SWEPT UP in a tidal wave of hungry warriors. Einherjar poured in from every direction, pushing, joking, and laughing as they headed for their seats.

“Hold on,” Sam told me.

She grabbed my wrist and we flew into the air Peter Pan–style.

I yelled. “A little warning?”

“*I said* hold on.”

We skimmed above the heads of the warriors. Nobody paid us much attention except for one guy I accidentally kicked in the face. Other Valkyries were also zipping around—some escorting warriors, some carrying platters of food and pitchers of drink.

We headed toward what was obviously the head table—where the home team would’ve sat if this were a Celtics game. A dozen grim-looking dudes were taking their seats in front of golden plates and jewel-encrusted goblets. In the place of honor stood an empty wooden throne with a high back, where two ravens perched, grooming their feathers.

Sam landed us at the table to the left. Twelve other people were just getting seated—two girls and four guys in regular street clothes; six Valkyries dressed more or less like Sam.

“Other newcomers?” I asked.

Sam nodded, her eyebrows furrowed. “Seven in one night is a lot.”

“Is that good or bad?”

“More heroes dying means more bad things are stirring in the world.

Which means...” She pursed her lips. “Never mind. Let’s get seated.”

Before we could, a tall Valkyrie stepped in our path. “Samirah al-Abbas, what have you brought us tonight—another half-troll? Perhaps a spy from your father?”

The girl looked about eighteen. She was big enough to play power forward, with snow-blond hair in braids down either shoulder. Over her green dress she wore a bandolier of ball-peen hammers, which struck me as an odd choice of weapon. Maybe Valhalla had a lot of loose nails. Around her neck hung a golden amulet shaped like a hammer. Her eyes were as pale blue and cold as a winter sky.

“Gunilla”—Sam’s voice tightened—“this is Magnus Chase.”

I held out my hand. “Gorilla? Pleased to meet you.”

The girl’s nostrils flared. “It is *Gunilla*, captain of the Valkyries. And you, newcomer—”

The foghorn I’d heard earlier echoed through the hall. This time I could see the source. Near the base of the tree, two guys held a black-and-white animal horn the size of a canoe while a third guy blew into it.

Thousands of warriors took their seats. Gorilla gave me one last stink-eye, then spun on her heel and marched off to the head table.

“Be careful,” Sam warned me. “Gunilla is powerful.”

“Also kind of a butt.”

The corner of Sam’s mouth twitched. “That, too.”

She looked shaken, her knuckles white on the haft of her ax. I wondered what Gunilla had meant by *a spy from your father*, but since my windpipe was still sore from the last time I made Sam angry, I decided not to ask.

I sat at the end of the table next to Sam, so I didn’t get to talk to the other newbies. Meanwhile, hundreds of Valkyries flew around the room, distributing food and drink. Whenever a Valkyrie’s pitcher was empty, she would swoop over the golden vat now bubbling over a large fire, fill her pitcher with yummy goat’s milk mead, and continue serving. The main course came from a roasting pit at the other end of the room. Rotating on a hundred-foot-long spit was the carcass of an animal. I wasn’t sure what it had been when it was alive, but it was easily the size of a blue whale.

A Valkyrie flew past, depositing a platter of food and a goblet in front of me. I couldn't tell what the slices of meat were, but they smelled great, drizzled in gravy with potatoes on the side and thick slices of bread with butter. It had been a while since I'd had a hot meal, but I still hesitated.

"What kind of animal am I eating?"

Sam wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "It's named Saehrimnir."

"Okay, first of all, who names their dinner? I don't want to know my dinner's name. This potato—is this potato named Steve?"

She rolled her eyes. "No, stupid. That's Phil. The *bread* is Steve."

I stared at her.

"Kidding," she said. "Saehrimnir is the magical beast of Valhalla. Every day they kill it and cook it for dinner. Every morning it's resurrected alive and well."

"That must suck for the animal. But is it like a cow or a pig or—"

"It's whatever you want it to be. My portion is beef. Different sections of the animal are chicken or pork. I don't do pork, but some of the guys here love it."

"What if I'm a vegetarian? What if I want falafel?"

Sam became very still. "Was that some sort of joke?"

"Why would it be a joke? I like falafel."

Her shoulders relaxed. "Well, if you want falafel, just ask for the left flank. That part is tofu and bean curd. They can spice it to taste like just about anything."

"You have a magic animal whose left flank is made of tofu."

"This is Valhalla, paradise for warriors in the service of Odin. Your food will taste perfect, whatever you choose."

My stomach was getting impatient, so I dug in. The barbecue had just the right mix of spicy and sweet. The bread was like a warm cloud with a buttery crust. Even Phil the potato tasted great.

Not being a huge fan of free-range goat milk, I was reluctant to try the mead, but the stuff in my goblet looked more like sparkling cider.

I took a sip. Sweet, but not too sweet. Cold and smooth, with undercurrents I couldn't quite identify. Was that blackberry? Or honey? Or vanilla? I drained my glass.

Suddenly, my senses were on fire. It wasn't like alcohol (and, yes, I've tried alcohol, thrown up, tried alcohol again, thrown up). The mead didn't

make me giddy, dopey, or nauseous. It was more like iced espresso without the bitter taste. It woke me up, filling me with a warm sense of confidence, but with no edginess or racing heartbeat.

“This stuff is good,” I admitted.

A Valkyrie swooped in, refilled my cup, and flew away.

I glanced at Sam, who was brushing bread crumbs off of her scarf. “Do you ever do serving duty?”

“Yeah, sure. We take turns. It’s an honor to serve the einherjar.” She didn’t even sound sarcastic.

“How many Valkyries are there?”

“Several thousand?”

“How many einherjar?”

Sam puffed her cheeks. “Tens of thousands? Like I said, this is just the first dinner. There are two other shifts for the older warriors. Valhalla has five hundred and forty doors. Each one is supposed to accommodate eight hundred warriors exiting for battle at once. That would mean four hundred and thirty-two thousand einherjar.”

“That’s a lot of tofu.”

She shrugged. “Personally, I think the number is exaggerated, but only Odin knows for sure. We’ll need a big army when Ragnarok rolls around.”

“Ragnarok,” I said.

“Doomsday,” Sam said. “When the Nine Worlds are destroyed in a great conflagration and the armies of gods and giants meet in battle for the last time.”

“Oh. *That* Ragnarok.”

I scanned the sea of teenaged fighters. I remembered my first day of public high school in Allston, a few months before my mom died and my life turned to Dumpster sludge. The school had had around two thousand kids. Between classes, the halls were sheer chaos. The cafeteria was like a piranha tank. But it was nothing compared to Valhalla.

I pointed toward the head table. “What about the fancy dudes? Most of them look older.”

“I wouldn’t call them *fancy dudes*,” Sam said. “Those are the thanes, the lords of Valhalla. Each one was personally invited by Odin to sit at his table.”

“So the empty throne—”

“Is for Odin. Yes. He...well, it’s been a while since he’s shown up for dinner, but his ravens watch everything and report back to him.”

Those ravens made me nervous with their beady black eyes. I got the feeling they were taking a particular interest in me.

Sam pointed to the right of the throne. “There’s Erik Bloodax. And that’s Erik the Red.”

“A lot of Eriks.”

“There’s Leif Erikson.”

“Whoa...but he’s not wearing a metal bra.”

“I’m going to ignore that comment. Over there is Snorri. Then our charming friend Gunilla. Then Lord Nelson and Davy Crockett.”

“Davy...wait, *seriously*? ”

“At the end is Helgi the hotel manager. You probably met him.”

Helgi seemed to be having a good time, laughing with Davy Crockett and chugging mead. Behind his chair, the bellhop Hunding stood, looking miserable, carefully peeling grapes and handing them to Helgi one at a time.

“What’s the deal with the manager and Hunding?”

Sam made a sour face. “Ancestral feud when they were alive. When they died, both made it to Valhalla, but Odin honored Helgi more. He put Helgi in charge of the hotel. Helgi’s first order was that his enemy Hunding would be his servant and do his menial tasks for all time.”

“That doesn’t seem like much of a paradise for Hunding.”

Sam hesitated. In a quieter voice, she said, “Even in Valhalla, there’s a pecking order. You don’t want to be at the bottom. Remember, when the ceremony begins—”

At the high table, the thanes began banging their cups on the table in unison. All around the hall, the einherjar joined in until the Hall of the Slain thundered with a metal heartbeat.

Helgi stood and raised his goblet. The noise died down.

“Warriors!” The manager’s voice filled the hall. He looked so regal it was hard to believe he was the same guy who a few hours ago had offered me a suite upgrade and a minibar key. “Seven new fallen have joined us today! That would be reason enough to celebrate, but we also have a special treat for you. Thanks to Valkyrie Captain Gunilla, today, for the first time, we will not just *hear* about our newcomers’ worthy deeds, we will be able to *see* them!”

Next to me, Sam made a choking sound. “No,” she muttered. “No, no, no...”

“Let the presentation of the dead commence!” Helgi bellowed. Ten thousand warriors turned and looked expectantly in my direction.



## Four Million Channels and There's Still Nothing On Except Valkyrie Vision

HOORAY FOR GOING LAST.

I was relieved when the presentations started with einherjar at the other end of the table...until I saw what the *other* newbies had done to get into Valhalla.

Helgi called, “Lars Alhstrom!”

A heavyset blond guy rose with his Valkyrie. Lars was so nervous he knocked over his goblet, splashing magic mead all over his crotch. A wave of laughter rippled through the hall.

Helgi smiled. “As many of you know, Captain Gunilla has been phasing in new equipment over the past few months. She’s been fitting her Valkyries’ armor with cameras to keep everyone accountable—and hopefully to keep *us* entertained!”

The warriors cheered and banged their mugs, drowning out the sound of Sam cursing next to me.

Helgi raised his goblet. “I present to you, Valkyrie Vision!”

Around the tree trunk, a ring of giant holographic screens flickered to life, floating in midair. The video was choppy, apparently taken from a camera on the shoulder of a Valkyrie. We were high in the air, circling over the scene of a sinking ferry in a gray sea. Half the lifeboats dangled

sideways from their cables. Passengers jumped overboard, some without life vests. The Valkyrie swooped in closer. The video's focus sharpened.

Lars Ahlstrom scrambled along the tilting deck, a fire extinguisher in his hands. The door to the inside lounge was blocked by a large metal container. Lars struggled to move it, but it was too heavy. Inside the lounge, a dozen people were trapped, banging desperately on the windows.

Lars shouted something to them in...Swedish? Norwegian? The meaning was clear: *GET BACK!*

As soon as they did, Lars smashed the extinguisher against the window. On the third try, it shattered. Despite the cold, Lars stripped off his coat and laid it across the broken glass.

He stayed at the window until the last passengers were safely out. They ran for the lifeboats. Lars picked up the fire extinguisher again and started to follow, but the ship lurched violently. His head slammed into the wall and he slid down, unconscious.

His body began to glow. The Valkyrie's arm appeared in the frame, reaching out. A shimmering golden apparition rose from Lars's body—his soul, I guessed. Golden Lars took the Valkyrie's hand, and the video screens went dark.

All around the feast hall, warriors cheered.

At the head table, the thanes debated among themselves. I was close enough to hear some of it. One guy—Lord Nelson?—questioned whether a fire extinguisher could count as a weapon.

I leaned toward Sam. "Why does that matter?"

She tore her bread into smaller and smaller pieces. "To get into Valhalla, a warrior must die in battle with a weapon in his or her hand. That's the only way."

"So," I whispered, "anyone could get into Valhalla if they just grabbed a sword and died?"

She snorted. "Of course not. We can't have kids taking up weapons and dying on purpose. There's nothing heroic about suicide. The sacrifice, the bravery has to be unplanned—a genuine heroic response to a crisis. It has to come from the heart, without any thought of reward."

"So...what if the thanes decide that a newbie shouldn't have been picked? Does he go back to being alive?" I tried not to sound too hopeful.

Sam wouldn't meet my eyes. "Once you're an einherji, there's no going back. You might get the worst work assignments. You might have a hard

time earning respect. But you stay in Valhalla. If the thanes rule the death unworthy...well, the Valkyrie takes the punishment for that.”

“Oh.” Suddenly I understood why all the Valkyries at our table looked a little tense.

The thanes took a vote among themselves. They agreed unanimously that the fire extinguisher could count as a weapon and Lars’s death could be seen as in combat.

“What greater enemy is there than the sea?” said Helgi. “We find Lars Ahlstrom worthy of Valhalla!”

More applause. Lars almost fainted. His Valkyrie held him up while smiling and waving at the crowd.

When the noise died down, Helgi continued. “Lars Ahlstrom, do you know your parentage?”

“I—” The newcomer’s voice cracked. “I never knew my father.”

Helgi nodded. “That is not uncommon. We will seek wisdom from the runes, unless the All-Father wishes to intercede.”

Everyone turned toward the unoccupied throne. The ravens ruffled their feathers and squawked. The throne remained empty.

Helgi didn’t look surprised, but his shoulders slumped with disappointment. He motioned toward the fire pit. From a cluster of servers and cooks, a lady in a green hooded robe shuffled forward. Her face was hidden in the shadows of her cowl, but judging from her stooped posture and her gnarled hands, she must have been ancient.

I murmured to Sam, “Who’s the Wicked Witch?”

“A *vala*. A seer. She can cast spells, read the future, and...other stuff.”

The vala approached our table. She stopped in front of Lars Ahlstrom and pulled a leather pouch from the folds of her robe. She plucked out a handful of runestones like the ones in Uncle Randolph’s study.

“And the runes?” I whispered to Sam. “What are they for?”

“They’re the old Viking alphabet,” she said, “but each letter also symbolizes something powerful—a god, a type of magic, a force of nature. They’re like the genetic code of the universe. The vala can read the stones to see your fate. The greatest sorcerers, like Odin, don’t even need to use the stones. They can manipulate reality simply by speaking the name of a rune.”

I made a mental note to avoid Odin. I didn’t need my reality manipulated any further.

In front of our table, the vala muttered something under her breath. She cast the stones at her feet. They landed on the dirt floor—some faceup, some facedown. One rune in particular seemed to catch everyone's attention. The holographic screens projected its image to everyone in the hall.



The mark meant nothing to me, but hundreds of warriors shouted with approval.

"Thor!" they cried. Then they started to chant, "THOR, THOR, THOR!"

Sam grunted. "As if we need another child of Thor."

"Why? What's wrong with them?"

"Nothing. They're great. Gunilla over there...she's a daughter of Thor."

"Oh."

The Valkyrie captain was smiling, which was even scarier than her scowl.

As the chanting subsided, the vala raised her withered arms. "Lars, son of Thor, rejoice! The runes say you shall fight well at Ragnarok. And tomorrow, in your first combat, you shall prove your valor and be decapitated!"

The audience cheered and laughed. Lars suddenly looked very pale. That just made the warriors laugh harder, as if decapitation were a hazing ritual no worse than a wedgie. The vala gathered her runes and retreated while Lars's Valkyrie helped him back into his seat.

The ceremony continued. Next up was a newcomer named Dede. She'd saved a bunch of kids at her village school when a warlord's soldiers had tried to kidnap them. She'd flirted with one of the soldiers, tricked him into letting her hold his assault rifle, then turned it on the warlord's men. She was killed, but her selfless act gave the other kids time to get away. The video was pretty violent. The Vikings loved it. Dede got a standing ovation.

The vala read the runes. She confirmed that Dede's parents were regular mortals, but nobody seemed to mind that. According to Dede's fortune, she would fight valiantly at Ragnarok. Over the next week she would lose her arms several times in combat. Within a hundred years she would rise to the thanes' table.

“Oooooo!” the crowd murmured appreciatively.

The other four newcomers were equally impressive. They’d all saved people. They’d sacrificed their lives bravely. Two were mortals. One was a son of Odin, which caused a minor commotion.

Sam leaned toward me. “Like I said, Odin has not been seen in quite a while. We welcome any sign that he still moves among mortals.”

The last newcomer was a daughter of Heimdall. I wasn’t sure who that was, but the Vikings seemed impressed.

My head was swimming from too much information. My senses were on fire from too much mead. I didn’t even realize we’d reached the end of the table until Helgi called my name.

“Magnus Chase!” he bellowed. “Rise and impress us with your courage!”



## My Blooper Video Goes Viral

### MY COURAGE IMPRESSED NO ONE.

I squirmed in my seat as the video played. The einherjar watched the screens in shocked silence. Then the mumbling and grumbling began, punctuated by bursts of incredulous laughter.

Valkyrie Vision showed only portions of what had happened. I saw myself on the bridge, facing Surt as he summoned a fiery tornado. The camera zoomed in on me threatening him with my corroded piece of metal. Then Hearth and Blitz appeared. Blitz hit the Black One with his MAKE WAY FOR DUCKLINGS sign. Hearth's squeaky toy arrow hit me in the butt. Surt punched me. Surt kicked me in the ribs. I puked and squirmed in agony.

The video fast-forwarded to me backing up against the bridge railing. Surt threw his fiery asphalt cannonball. I swung my sword and missed. In the feast hall, thousands of warriors grunted “Ooooo!” as the chunk of pavement hit me in the gut. Surt charged, and we both went over the side, grappling as we fell.

Just before we hit the water, the video froze and zoomed in. The sword was now sticking out of Surt’s gut, but my hands weren’t on the grip. They were wrapped around Surt’s big neck.

An uncomfortable murmur spread through the room.

"No," I said. "No, that's not how—Someone edited that. It's like a blooper reel."

Sam's face had turned to stone. At the thanes' table, Captain Gunilla smirked. *Her cameras*, I realized, *her editing*.

For some reason, Gunilla wanted to disgrace Sam by making me look like an idiot...which, granted, wasn't a difficult task.

Helgi set down his goblet. "Samirah al-Abbas...explain."

Sam touched the edge of her scarf. I had a feeling she wanted to pull it over her head and hope the room disappeared. I couldn't blame her.

"Magnus Chase died bravely," she said. "He stood alone against Surt."

More uneasy murmuring.

One of the thanes stood. "You say that was Surt. A fire jotun, certainly, but if you are suggesting it was the Lord of Muspellheim himself—"

"I know what I saw, Erik Bloodax. This one"—Sam gestured at me like I was a prize specimen—"saved many lives on that bridge. The video does not show the whole story. Magnus Chase acted like a hero. He deserves to be among the fallen."

Another thane rose. "He didn't actually die with the sword in his hand."

"Lord Ottar"—Sam's voice sounded strained—"the thanes have looked past such a technicality before. Whether or not Magnus gripped the sword at the moment of death, he died bravely in combat. That is the spirit of Odin's law."

Lord Ottar sniffed. "Thank you, Samirah al-Abbas, daughter of Loki, for teaching us the spirit of Odin's law."

The tension level in the hall went up about thirty notches. Sam's hand drifted toward her ax. I doubted anyone but me could see how her fingers twitched.

*Loki*...I knew *that* name—Norse mythology's big villain, born of giants. He was the archenemy of the gods. If Sam was his daughter, why was she here? How had she become a Valkyrie?

I happened to meet Gunilla's eyes. The captain was obviously loving this drama. She could barely suppress a smile. If she was Thor's kid, that explained why she hated Sam. In the old stories, Thor and Loki were always trying to melt each other's faces.

The thanes debated among themselves.

Finally, Helgi the manager spoke. "Samirah, we're not seeing any heroism in this boy's death. We see a dwarf and an elf with toy weapons—"

“A dwarf and an elf?” I asked, but Helgi ignored me.

“—we see a fire jotun who fell off a bridge and took the boy with him. That’s an unusual situation, a son of Muspell crossing into Midgard, but it has happened before.”

“Shoot,” muttered a thane with bushy sideburns. “Y’all should’ve seen the big ol’ fire jotun Santa Anna had with him at the Alamo. I tell you—”

“Yes, thank you, Lord Crockett.” Helgi cleared his throat. “As I was saying, we see very little evidence that Magnus Chase was a worthy choice for Valhalla.”

“My lords”—Sam spoke slowly and carefully, like she was addressing children—“the video is not accurate.”

Helgi laughed. “Are you suggesting we shouldn’t trust our own eyes?”

“I’m suggesting that you hear the story from my point of view. It has always been our tradition to *tell* of the hero’s deeds.”

Gunilla stood. “Pardon me, my lords, but Samirah is correct. Perhaps we should let the daughter of Loki speak.”

The crowd booed and hissed. Some called, “No! No!”

Helgi gestured for silence. “Gunilla, you do your sisterhood credit by defending a fellow Valkyrie, but Loki has always been a master of smooth, honeyed words. Personally, I would rather trust what I see than have it *spun* for me in some clever explanation.”

Warriors applauded.

Gunilla shrugged like, *Oh, well, I tried!* and sank back into her chair.

“Magnus Chase!” Helgi called. “Do you know your parentage?”

I counted to five. My first inclination was to yell, *No, but your dad was apparently a jackass!*

“I don’t know my father,” I admitted. “But, look, about that video—”

“Perhaps you have potential we do not recognize,” Helgi said. “Perhaps you are a son of Odin or Thor or some other noble war god, and your presence brings us honor. We will seek wisdom from the runes, unless the All-Father would intercede?”

He glanced at the throne, which remained empty. The ravens studied me with dark hungry eyes.

“Very well,” Helgi said. “Bring forth the vala and—”

Between the roots of the tree, where the waterfall hit the dark lake, a massive bubble erupted. *BLOOP!* On the surface of the water stood three women shrouded in white.

Except for the crackle of cooking fire and the sound of the waterfall, the hall was silent. Thousands of warriors watched, frozen in amazement, as the three white women glided across the floor, heading toward me.

“Sam?” I whispered. “Sam, what’s going on?”

Her hand fell from her ax.

“The Norns,” she said. “The Norns themselves have come to read your fate.”



## Norns. Why Did It Have to Be Norns?

I REALLY WISHED someone had warned me I was going to die. Like, *Hey, you're diving off a bridge tomorrow and becoming an undead Viking, so go read up on Valhalla.*

I felt seriously unprepared.

I remembered hearing about Norns, the ladies who controlled mortal destinies, but I didn't know their names or their motivation or the proper etiquette for meeting them. Was I supposed to bow? Offer them gifts? Run away screaming?

Next to me, Sam muttered, "This is bad. The Norns only show up in extreme cases."

I didn't want to be an extreme case. I wanted to be an easy case: *Hey, good job. You're a hero. Have a cookie.*

Or even better: *Oops. This was all a mistake. You can go back to your regularly scheduled life.*

Not that my regularly scheduled life was so great, but it beat getting judged unworthy by twelve bearded guys named Erik.

As the Norns got closer, I realized how big they were—at least nine feet tall each. Under their hoods, their faces were beautiful but unnerving—blank white, even their eyes. Trailing behind them came a sheet of fog like

a bridal train. They stopped twenty feet in front of my table and turned up their palms. Their skin was like sculpted snow.

*Magnus Chase.* I couldn't tell which Norn had spoken. The soft disembodied voice resonated through the hall, seeping into my head, turning my skull into an icebox. *Harbinger of the Wolf*.

The crowd stirred uneasily. I'd seen the word *harbinger* somewhere before, maybe in a fantasy novel, but I couldn't remember what it meant. I didn't like the sound of it. I liked the sound of *wolf* even less.

I'd just about decided that running away screaming was my smartest option. Then, in the hands of the middle Norn, fog collected, solidifying into half a dozen runestones. She threw them into the air. They floated above her, each rune expanding into a luminous white symbol as big as a poster board.

I couldn't read runes, but I recognized the one in the center. It was the same symbol I'd picked from the pouch in Uncle Randolph's office:



*Fehu*, announced the cold voice. *The rune of Frey*.

Thousands of warriors shifted in their seats, clanking restlessly in their armor.

Frey...Who was Frey? My mind felt coated with frost. My thoughts were sluggish.

The Norns spoke together, three ghostly voices chanting in unison, shaking leaves from the giant tree:

*Wrongly chosen, wrongly slain,  
A hero Valhalla cannot contain.  
Nine days hence the sun must go east,  
Ere Sword of Summer unbinds the beast.*

The glowing runes dissolved. The three Norns bowed to me. They melted into the fog and disappeared.

I glanced at Sam. "How often does that happen?"

She looked like she'd been smacked between the eyes with one of Gunilla's hammers. "No. Choosing you *couldn't* have been a mistake. I was told...I was promised—"

"Someone *told* you to pick me up?"

Instead of answering, she murmured under her breath—as if running calculations for a rocket that had gone off course.

At the thanes' table, the lords conferred. All around the hall, thousands of einherjar studied me. My stomach folded itself into various origami shapes.

Finally, Helgi faced me. "Magnus Chase, son of Frey, your destiny is troubling. The lords of Valhalla must think on this further. For the time being, you shall be welcomed as a comrade. You are one of the einherjar now. That cannot be reversed, even if it was a mistake."

He scowled at Sam. "Samirah al-Abbas, the Norns themselves have pronounced your judgment in error. Do you have any defense?"

Sam's eyes widened as if she'd just realized something. "The son of Frey..." She looked around the room desperately. "Einherjar, don't you see? This is the son of Frey! Surt himself was on that bridge! That means the sword..." She turned to the thanes' table. "Gunilla, you *must* see what that means. We have to find that sword! A quest, immediately—"

Helgi banged his fist on the table. "Enough! Samirah, you stand in judgment for a grave mistake. It is not your place to tell us what to do. It is *definitely* not your place to order a quest!"

"I did not make a mistake," Sam said. "I did as I was ordered! I—"

"Ordered?" Helgi narrowed his eyes. "Ordered by whom?"

Sam's mouth shut. She seemed to deflate.

Helgi nodded grimly. "I see. Captain Gunilla, before I announce the thanes' judgment on this Valkyrie, do you wish to speak?"

Gunilla stirred. The gleam in her eyes was gone. She looked like someone who'd gotten in line for the merry-go-round and unexpectedly found herself trapped on a roller coaster.

"I—" She shook her head. "No, my lord. I—I have nothing to add."

"Very well," said Helgi. "Samirah al-Abbas, for your poor judgment with this einherji Magnus Chase, and for your past mistakes, the thanes rule that you be expelled from the sisterhood of Valkyries. You are hereby stripped of your powers and privileges. Return to Midgard in disgrace!"

Sam grabbed my arm. "Magnus, listen to me. You have to find the sword. You have to stop them—"

Like a camera flash: a burst of light and Sam was gone. Her half-eaten meal and the bread crumbs around her seat were the only signs she'd ever existed.

“So concludes our feast,” Helgi announced. “I will see you all tomorrow on the field of battle! Sleep well, and dream of glorious death!”



## I Did Not Ask for Biceps

I DIDN'T SLEEP MUCH. I definitely didn't dream of glorious death. Been there, done that, got the afterlife.

While I was at dinner, my sofa had been put back and repaired. I sat on it and thumbed through my old children's book of Norse mythology, but it didn't have much about Frey. One tiny picture showed a blond guy in a tunic frolicking in the woods, a blond lady at his side, a couple of cats playing at their feet.

*Frey was the god of spring and summer! read the caption. He was the god of wealth, abundance, and fertility. His twin sister, Freya, the goddess of love, was very pretty! She had cats!*

I tossed the book aside. Great. My dad was a D-list god who frolicked in the woods. He was probably eliminated early last season on *Dancing with the Asgardians*.

Did it crush me to learn this? Not really. You might not believe it, but my dad's identity had never been a big deal to me. It wasn't like I ever felt incomplete—like if only I knew my dad, my life would make sense. I knew who I was. I was Natalie Chase's son. As for life making sense...I'd seen too much weirdness to expect that.

Still, I had a lot of items on my *I-don't-get-it* list. At the very top: How could a homeless kid have a dad who was the god of abundance and

wealth? Talk about a cruel joke.

Also, why would I get targeted by a big bad dude like Surt? If he was the lord of Muspellheim, High King Roasty Toasty, shouldn't he pick on more interesting heroes, like the children of Thor? At least their dad had a movie franchise. Frey didn't even have his own cats. He had to borrow his sister's.

And the Sword of Summer...assuming that was the blade I had pulled from the Charles River, how had it ended up there? Why was it so important? Uncle Randolph had been searching for it for years. Sam's last words to me were about finding the sword again. If it had belonged to my dad, and my dad was an immortal god, why had he allowed his weapon to sit at the bottom of a river for a thousand years?

I stared at the empty fireplace. The Norns' words kept playing in my head, though I wanted to forget them.

*Harbinger of the Wolf.* I remembered what a harbinger was now: something that signaled the arrival of a powerful force, like a doorman announcing the president, or a red sky before a hurricane. I did not want to be the harbinger of the wolf. I'd seen enough wolves to last me an eternal lifetime. I wanted to be the harbinger of ice cream, or falafel.

*Wrongly chosen, wrongly slain.*

A little late to announce that now. I was a freaking einherji. My name was on the door. I had a key to the minibar.

*A hero Valhalla cannot contain.*

I liked this line better. Maybe it meant I could bust out of here. Or I guessed it could mean that the thanes would vaporize me in a burst of light or feed me to their magical goat.

*Nine days hence the sun must go east,  
Ere Sword of Summer unbinds the beast.*

Those lines bothered me the most. Last I checked, the sun moved east to west. And who was the beast? I was betting a wolf, because it's always a stinking wolf. If the sword was supposed to let loose a wolf, the sword should've stayed lost.

Some memory nagged at me...a bound wolf. I stared at the children's book of mythology, half tempted to pick it up again. But I was already unsettled enough.

*Magnus, listen to me,* Sam had said. *You have to find the sword. You have to stop them.*

I felt bad about Samirah al-Abbas. I was still miffed at her for bringing me here, especially if it had been a mistake, but I didn't want to see her kicked out of the Valkyries because some doctored video made me look like a doofus. (Okay, *more* of a doofus than usual.)

I decided I should sleep. I didn't feel tired, but if I stayed awake thinking any longer, my brain would overheat.

I tried the bed. Too soft. I ended up in the atrium, sprawled on the grass, gazing at the stars through the tree branches.

At some point, I must have fallen asleep.

A sharp sound startled me awake—a branch cracking. Someone cursed.

Above me, the sky was turning gray in the predawn light. A few leaves helicoptered through the air. Branches bobbed as if something heavy had just scrambled through them.

I lay still, listening, watching. Nothing. Had I imagined that voice?

Over in the foyer, a piece of paper slid under my doorway.

I sat up groggily.

Maybe the management was giving me the bill and letting me check out. I staggered toward the door.

My hand trembled as I picked up the paper, but it wasn't a bill. It was a handwritten note in really nice cursive:

*Hi, neighbor.*

*Join us in lounge 19 for breakfast. Down the hall to the left. Bring your weapons and armor.*

*T.J.*

T.J....Thomas Jefferson, Jr., the guy across the hall.

After the fiasco last night, I didn't know why he'd want to invite me to breakfast. I also didn't understand why I needed weapons and armor.

Maybe Viking bagels fought back.

I was tempted to barricade my door and hide in my room. Perhaps everyone would leave me alone. Maybe once all the warriors were busy

with their Bikram yoga to the death, I could sneak out and find an exit to Boston.

On the other hand, I wanted answers. I couldn't shake the idea that if this was a place for the brave dead, my mom might be here somewhere. Or someone might know which afterlife she *had* gone to. At least this guy T.J. seemed friendly. I could hang with him for a while and see what he could tell me.

I trudged to the bathroom.

I was afraid the toilet would be some Viking death machine with ax blades and a flush-operated crossbow, but it worked like a normal one. It definitely wasn't any scarier than the public restrooms in the Common.

The medicine cabinet was stocked with all my usual toiletries...or at least the toiletries I *used* to like when I had a home.

And the shower...I tried to remember the last time I'd had a leisurely hot shower. Sure, I'd arrived in Valhalla feeling magically dry-cleaned, but after a bad night's sleep in the atrium, I was ready for a good old-fashioned scrub down.

I peeled off my layers of shirts and almost screamed.

What was wrong with my chest? Why did my arms look that way?  
What were those weird bulgy areas?

Usually I avoided looking at my reflection. I wasn't somebody I wanted to see on a regular basis. But now I faced the mirror.

My hair was the same, a bit less grimy and tangled, but still hanging to my jawline in a curtain of dirty blond, parted in the middle.

*You look like Kurt Cobain*, my mom used to tease me. *I loved Kurt Cobain, except for the fact that he died.*

*Well, guess what, Mom?* I thought. *I have that in common with him too now!*

My eyes were gray—more like my cousin Annabeth's than my mom's. They had a haunted, scary emptiness to them, but that was normal. The look had served me well on the streets.

My upper body, however, I hardly recognized. Ever since my bad asthma days when I was little, I'd always been on the scrawny side. Even with all the hiking and camping, I'd had a concave chest, sticking-out ribs, and skin so pale you could trace the road map of blue veins.

Now...those strange new bulgy areas looked suspiciously like muscles.

Don't get me wrong. It wasn't as dramatic as turning into Captain America. I was still lean and pale, but my arms had definition. My chest didn't look like it would collapse in the next strong wind. My skin was smoother, less translucent. All the rashes and nicks and bites that came from living on the street had disappeared. Even the scar on my left palm, where I'd cut myself on a hunting knife at age ten, had vanished.

I remembered how strong I'd felt when I first arrived at Valhalla, how I'd tossed my sofa across the room last night. I hadn't really stopped to think about it.

What had Hunding called Valhalla...*an upgrade*?

I made a fist.

I'm not sure what came over me. I guess when I realized that even my body wasn't my own, the anger, fear, and uncertainty of the last twenty-four hours reached critical mass. I'd been plucked out of my life. I'd been threatened, humiliated, and forcibly upgraded. I hadn't asked for a suite. I hadn't asked for biceps.

I hit the wall. Literally.

My fist went straight through the tile, the drywall, and a two-by-four stud. I pulled out my hand. I wriggled my fingers. Nothing felt broken.

I regarded the fist-shaped hole I'd made above the towel bar. "Yep," I grumbled. "Housekeeping loves me."

The shower helped calm me down. Afterward, wrapped in a fluffy HV-embroidered bathrobe, I padded to the closet to search for clothes. Inside were three sets of blue jeans, three green T-shirts (all marked PROPERTY OF HOTEL VALHALLA), underwear, socks, a pair of good running shoes, and a sheathed sword. Leaning against the ironing board was a circular green shield with the golden rune of Frey painted in the middle.

Okay, then. I guess I knew what I was wearing today.

I spent ten minutes trying to figure out how to position the sword's sheath on my belt. I was left-handed. Did that mean the sword went on the right? Were left-handed swords different from right-handed ones?

I attempted to draw the blade and just about ripped my pants off. Oh, yeah, I was going to be a hit on the battlefield.

I practiced swinging the sword. I wondered if it would start humming and guiding my hand, the way the sword on the bridge had done when I faced Surt. But no. This blade seemed to be a regular piece of non-humming metal with no cruise-control feature. I managed to sheathe it

without losing any fingers. I slung the shield across my back, the way the warriors at dinner last night had been wearing theirs. The strap dug into my neck and made me want to gag.

I looked in the mirror again.

“You, sir,” I muttered, “look like a huge dork.”

My reflection did not argue.

I went out to find breakfast and kill it with my sword.



## I Do Mighty Combat with Eggs

“THERE HE IS.” T.J. rose and grabbed my hand. “Sit. Join us. You made quite a first impression last night!”

He was dressed the same as yesterday: a blue wool army jacket over a green hotel T-shirt, jeans, and leather boots.

With him sat the half-troll X, the redhead Mallory Keen, and a guy I guessed was Halfborn Gunderson, who looked like Robinson Crusoe on steroids. His shirt was a patchwork of animal pelts. His hide pants were in tatters. Even by Viking standards his beard was wild, decorated with most of a cheese omelet.

My four hallmates made room for me at the table, which felt pretty good.

Compared to the main feast hall, lounge nineteen was downright intimate. Scattered around the room were a dozen tables, most unoccupied. In one corner, a fireplace crackled in front of a beat-up sofa. Along the other wall, a buffet table was laden with every kind of breakfast food imaginable (and a few kinds I had *never* imagined).

T.J. and company had parked themselves in front of a big picture window overlooking a vast field of ice and swirling snow. It made no sense, considering that it was summer in my atrium right down the hall, but I'd already learned that the hotel's geography was wack.

“That’s Niflheim,” T.J. explained, “the realm of ice. The view changes daily, cycling through the Nine Worlds.”

“The Nine Worlds...” I stared at my scrambled eggs, wondering which solar system they’d come from. “I keep hearing about nine worlds. Hard to believe.”

Mallory Keen blew powdered sugar off her doughnut. “Believe it, newbie. I’ve visited six of them so far.”

“Five here.” Halfborn grinned, showing me the rest of his cheese omelet. “Course, Midgard hardly counts. That’s the human world. Been to Alfheim, Nidavellir, Jotunheim—”

“Disney World,” X said.

Mallory sighed. With her red hair, green eyes, and powdered sugar around her mouth, she reminded me of a reverse-color-scheme Joker. “For the last time, you numbskull, Disney World is not one of the nine.”

“Why is it called a world, then?” X nodded smugly, the argument won, and went back to his meal, sucking meat from the shell of a large crustacean.

T.J. pushed his empty plate away. “Magnus, I don’t know if it helps, but the Nine Worlds aren’t really separate planets. They’re more like...different dimensions, different layers of reality, all connected by the World Tree.”

“Thanks,” I said. “That’s much more confusing.”

He laughed. “Yeah, I guess it is.”

“The World Tree is the tree in the feast hall?”

“Nah,” Mallory said. “The World Tree is *much* bigger. You’ll see, sooner or later.”

That sounded ominous. I tried to concentrate on my food, but it was difficult with X right next to me demolishing a slimy mutant crab.

I pointed at T.J.’s jacket. “That’s a Civil War uniform?”

“Private in the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts, my friend. I’m a Boston boy, same as you. I just got here a little earlier.”

I did the calculations. “You died in battle a hundred and fifty years ago?”

T.J. beamed. “The assault on Fort Wagner, South Carolina. My dad was Tyr, god of courage, law, and trial by combat. My mom was a runaway slave.”

I tried to fit that into my new worldview: a teenager from the 1860s, the son of a former slave and a Norse god, who was now having breakfast with

me in an extra-dimensional hotel.

X belched, which put things in perspective.

“Gods of Asgard!” Mallory complained. “That smell!”

“Sorry,” X grunted.

“Is your name really X?” I asked.

“No. My real name is—” The half-troll said something that started with Ks and went on for about thirty seconds.

Halfborn wiped his hands on his pelt shirt. “You see? Nobody can pronounce that. We call him X.”

“X,” agreed X.

“He’s another one of Sam al-Abbas’s acquisitions,” T.J. said. “X stumbled across a dogfight...one of those illegal ones in, where, Chicago?”

“Chee-cah-go,” affirmed X.

“He saw what was going on and went nuts. Started smashing up the place, walloping the bettors, freeing the animals.”

“Dogs should fight for themselves,” X said. “Not for greedy humans. They should be wild and free. They should not be kept in cages.”

I didn’t want to argue with the big guy, but I wasn’t sure I liked the idea of wild dogs fighting for themselves. That sounded a lot like wolves—an animal I refused to harbinge.

“Anyway,” T.J. said, “it turned into a full-scale battle: X against a bunch of gangsters with automatic weapons. They finally killed him, but X took down a lot of scumbags and freed a lot of dogs. That was what...a month ago?”

X grunted and continued sucking his shellfish.

T.J. spread his hands. “Samirah judged him worthy and brought him here. She got some flak for that decision.”

Mallory snorted. “That’s putting it mildly. A troll in Valhalla. Who could possibly object?”

“Half-troll,” X corrected. “That is my *better* half, Mallory Keen.”

“She didn’t mean anything, X,” T.J. said. “It’s just that prejudice dies hard. When I got here in 1863, I wasn’t exactly welcomed with open arms, either.”

Mallory rolled her eyes. “Then you won them over with your dazzling personality. I swear, you lot are giving floor nineteen a bad name. And now we have Magnus.”

Halfborn leaned toward me. “Don’t mind Mallory. She’s a sweetheart, once you get past the fact that she’s a horrible person.”

“Shut up, Halfborn.”

The big guy chuckled. “She’s just grumpy because she died trying to disarm a car bomb with her face.”

Mallory’s ears turned as red as hummingbird juice. “I didn’t—it wasn’t—Argh!”

“Magnus, don’t worry about that mess last night,” continued Halfborn. “Folks will forget about it in a few decades. Believe me, I’ve seen it all. I died during the Viking invasion of East Anglia, fought under the banner of Ivar the Boneless. I took twenty arrows in the chest protecting my thane!”

“Ouch,” I said.

Halfborn shrugged. “I’ve been here for...oh, going on twelve hundred years now.”

I stared at him. Despite his bulk and his beard, Halfborn looked maybe eighteen, tops. “How do you stand it without going crazy? And why do they call you Halfborn?”

His smile faded. “Second question first...when I was born, I was so big, strong, and ugly that my mother said I looked like I’d been half born, half carved from rock. The name stuck.”

“And you’re still ugly,” Mallory muttered.

“As for how to avoid going crazy here...Some do lose it, Magnus. Waiting for Ragnarok is hard. The trick is to keep busy. There’s plenty to do here. Me, I’ve learned a dozen languages, including English. I earned a doctorate in Germanic literature, and I learned to knit.”

T.J. nodded. “That’s why I invited you to breakfast, Magnus.”

“To learn knitting?”

“To keep active! Spending too much time alone in your room can be dangerous. If you isolate yourself, you start to fade. Some of the old-timers...” He cleared his throat. “It doesn’t matter. You’re here! Just keep showing up every morning until Doomsday, and you’ll be fine.”

I stared out the window at the swirling snow. I thought about Sam’s warning to find the sword, the Norns chanting that something bad would happen in nine days. “You said you’ve visited the other worlds. That means you can leave the hotel.”

The group exchanged uneasy glances.

“Yes,” Halfborn said. “But our main job is to wait for Ragnarok. Train, train, train.”

“I rode the train at Disney World,” said X.

Maybe he meant it as a jest. The half-troll seemed to have two facial expressions: wet cement and dry cement.

“Occasionally,” said T.J., “einherjar are sent into the Nine Worlds on missions.”

“Tracking down monsters,” Mallory offered. “Killing giants who cross into Midgard. Stopping witches and wights. And of course, dealing with rogues—”

“Wights? Rogues?” I asked.

“Point is,” said Halfborn, “we only leave Valhalla under orders from Odin or the thanes.”

“But, hypothetically,” I said, “I could go back to earth, Midgard, whatever—”

“Hypothetically, yes,” T.J. said. “Look, I know that business with the Norns must be driving you bonkers, but we don’t know what the prophecy means. Give the thanes some time to decide what to do. You can’t rush off and do something stupid.”

“Gods forbid,” said Mallory. “We *never* do anything stupid. Like that late-night pizza run to Santarpio’s. That never happened.”

“Shut up, woman,” Halfborn growled.

“Woman?” Mallory reached for the knife at her belt. “Watch your words, you overgrown Swedish hamster.”

“Hold on,” I said. “You guys know how to sneak out of—”

T.J. coughed loudly. “Sorry, I didn’t hear that. I’m sure you weren’t asking about anything against the rules. Magnus, first of all: if you returned to Midgard so soon, how would you explain it to those who knew you? Everyone thinks you’re dead. Usually, *if* we go back, we wait until everyone we knew is dead. It’s easier all the way around. Besides, it takes a while, sometimes years, for your einherji strength to develop fully.”

I tried to imagine waiting here for years. I didn’t have many friends or relatives to go back to. Still, I didn’t want to be stuck here—learning new languages, knitting sweaters—for ages. After seeing my cousin Annabeth, I kind of wanted to reconnect with her before she died. And if Samirah was right about my mom not being in Valhalla...I wanted to find her, wherever she was.

“But it’s possible to leave without permission,” I persisted. “Maybe not forever, just for a while.”

T.J. shifted uncomfortably. “Valhalla has doors into every world. The hotel is designed that way. Most exits are guarded, but...well, there are a lot of ways to Boston, since Boston is the center of Midgard.”

I glanced around the table. Nobody was laughing. “It is?”

“Sure,” T.J. said. “It’s right at the trunk of the World Tree, the easiest spot from which to access the other worlds. Why do you think Boston is called the Hub of the Universe?”

“Wishful thinking?”

“No. Mortals have always known there was something about that location, even if they couldn’t put their finger on what it was. The Vikings searched for the center of the world for years. They knew the entrance to Asgard was in the west. That’s one reason they kept exploring into North America. When they met the Native Americans—”

“We called them the skraelings,” Halfborn said. “Vicious fighters. I liked them.”

“—the natives had all sorts of stories about how strong the spirit world was in this area. Later, when the Puritans settled, well...John Winthrop’s vision of a shining ‘City on a Hill’? That wasn’t just a metaphor. He had a vision of Asgard, a glimpse into the other worlds. And the Salem witch trials? Hysteria caused by magic seeping into Midgard. Edgar Allan Poe was born in Boston. It’s no accident his most famous poem was about a raven, one of Odin’s sacred animals.”

“Enough.” Mallory gave me a disgusted look. “T.J. will take forever when answering a yes/no question. The answer is yes, Magnus. It is possible to leave, with or without permission.”

X cracked a crab claw. “You would not be immortal.”

“Yeah,” T.J. said. “That’s the second big problem. In Valhalla, you can’t die—not permanently. You’ll just keep getting resurrected. It’s part of the training.”

I remembered the guy who had gotten impaled in the lobby and dragged off by wolves. Hunding had said he would be fine again by dinner.

“But outside of Valhalla?”

“Out in the Nine Worlds,” T.J. said, “you’re still an einherji. You’re faster and stronger and tougher than any regular mortal. But if you die out there, you stay dead. Your soul might go to Helheim. Or you might simply

dissolve into the primordial void—Ginnungagap. Hard to know. It's not worth the risk.”

“Unless...” Halfborn picked some egg out of his beard. “Unless he really *did* find the sword of Frey, and the legends are true—”

“It’s Magnus’s first day,” T.J. said. “Let’s not go into that. He’s already freaked out enough.”

“Freak me out more,” I said. “What legends exactly?”

In the hallway, a horn blasted. At the other tables, einherjar started to get up and clear their plates.

Halfborn rubbed his hands eagerly. “Talking will have to wait. It’s battle time!”

“Battle time,” X agreed.

T.J. grimaced. “Magnus, we should probably warn you about the first day initiation. Don’t be discouraged if—”

“Oh, shush,” said Mallory. “Don’t spoil the surprise!” She gave me a powdered sugar smile. “I can’t wait to see the new boy get dismembered!”



## Do Not Call Me Beantown. Like, *Ever*

I TOLD MY NEW FRIENDS I was allergic to dismemberment. They just laughed and herded me toward the combat arena. This is why I don't like making new friends.

The battlefield was so huge I couldn't process what I was seeing.

Back in the good old days when I was a street kid, I used to sleep on rooftops in the summertime. I could see the entire cityscape of Boston from Fenway Park to Bunker Hill. Valhalla's battlefield was bigger than that. It offered maybe three square miles of interesting places to die, all contained within the hotel like an interior courtyard.

On all four sides rose the walls of the building—cliffs of white marble and gold-railed balconies, some hung with banners, some decorated with shields, some fitted with catapults. The upper floors seemed to dissolve in the hazy glow of the sky, as blank white as a fluorescent light.

In the center of the field loomed a few craggy hills. Clumps of forest marbled the landscape. The outer rim was mostly rolling pastures, with a river as wide as the Charles snaking through. Several villages dotted the riverbank, maybe for those who preferred their warfare urban.

From hundreds of doors in the walls around the field, battalions of warriors were streaming in, their weapons and armor glinting in the harsh light. Some einherjar wore full plate mail like medieval knights. Others

wore chain mail shirts, breeches, and combat boots. A few sported camo fatigues and AK-47s. One guy wore nothing but a Speedo. He'd painted himself blue and was armed only with a baseball bat. Across his chest were the words COME AT ME, BRO.

"I feel underdressed," I said.

X cracked his knuckles. "Armor does not make victory. Neither do weapons."

Easy for him to say. He was larger than some sovereign nations.

Halfborn Gunderson was also taking the minimalist approach. He'd stripped down to nothing but his leggings, though he did sport a pair of vicious-looking double-bladed axes. Standing next to anyone else, Halfborn would've looked massive. Next to X, he looked like a toddler...with a beard, abs, and axes.

T.J. fastened his bayonet to his rifle. "Magnus, if you want more than the basic equipment, you'll have to capture it or trade for it. The hotel armories take red gold, or they work on a barter system."

"Is that how you got your rifle?"

"Nah, this is the weapon I died with. I hardly ever fire it. Bullets don't have much effect on einherjar. Those guys out there with the assault rifles? That's all flash and noise. They're the least dangerous people on the field. But this bayonet? It's bone steel, a gift from my father. Bone steel works just fine."

"Bone steel."

"Yeah. You'll learn."

My sword hand was already sweating. My shield felt much too flimsy. "So which groups are we fighting against?"

Halfborn clapped me on the back. "All of them! Vikings fight in small groups, my friend. We are your shield brothers."

"And shield sister," Mallory said. "Though some of us are shield idiots."

Halfborn ignored her. "Stick with us, Magnus, and...well, you won't do fine. You'll get killed quickly. But stick with us anyway. We'll wade into battle and slaughter as many as possible!"

"That's your plan?"

Halfborn tilted his head. "Why would I have a plan?"

"Oh, sometimes we do," said T.J. "Wednesdays are siege warfare. That's more complicated. Thursdays they bring out the dragons."

Mallory drew her sword and serrated dagger. “Today is free-for-all combat. I love Tuesdays.”

From a thousand different balconies, horns blasted. The einherjar charged into battle.

Until that morning, I’d never understood the term *bloodbath*. Within a few minutes, we were literally slipping in the stuff.

We’d just stepped onto the field when an ax flew out of nowhere and stuck in my shield, the blade going right through the wood above my arm.

Mallory yelled and threw her knife, which sank into the ax thrower’s chest. He fell to his knees, laughing. “Good one!” Then he collapsed, dead.

Halfborn waded through enemies, his axes whirling, chopping off heads and limbs until he looked like he’d been playing paintball with only red paint. It was disgusting. And horrifying. And the most disturbing part? The einherjar treated it like a game. They killed with glee. They died as if someone had just taken down their avatar in *Call of Duty*. I’d never liked that game.

“Ah, that sucks,” one guy muttered as he studied the four arrows in his chest.

Another yelled, “I’ll get you tomorrow, Trixie!” before falling sideways, a spear stuck through his gut.

T.J. sang “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” while he stabbed and parried with his bayonet.

X smashed through one group after another. A dozen arrows now stuck out of his back like porcupine quills, but they didn’t seem to bother him. Every time his fist connected, an einherji turned two-dimensional.

As for me, I shuffled along in abject terror, my shield raised, my sword dragging. I’d been told that death here wasn’t permanent, but I had a hard time believing it. A bunch of warriors with sharp pointy objects were trying to kill me. I didn’t want to be killed.

I managed to parry a sword strike. I deflected a spear with my shield. I had a clear opening to stab one girl whose guard was down, but I just couldn’t make myself do it.

That was a mistake. Her ax bit into my thigh. Pain flared all the way up to my neck.

Mallory cut the girl down. “Come on, Chase, keep moving! You’ll get used to the pain after a while.”

“Great.” I grimaced. “Something to look forward to.”

T.J. jabbed his bayonet through the faceplate of a medieval knight.  
“Let’s take that hill!” He pointed to a nearby ridge at the edge of the woods.

“Why?” I yelled.

“Because it’s a hill!”

“He loves taking hills,” Mallory grumbled. “It’s a Civil War thing.”

We waded through the battle, heading for the high ground. My thigh still hurt, but the bleeding had stopped. Was that normal?

T.J. raised his rifle. He yelled, “Charge!” just as a javelin ran him through from behind.

“T.J!” I yelled.

He caught my eye, managed a weak smile, then face-planted in the mud.

“For Frigg’s sake!” Mallory cursed. “Come on, newbie.”

She grabbed my arm and pulled me along. More javelins sailed over my head.

“You guys do this every *day*?” I demanded.

“No. Like we told you—Thursdays are dragons.”

“But—”

“Hey, Beantown, the whole point is to get used to the horrors of battle. You think this is bad? Wait until we actually have to fight at Ragnarok.”

“Why am *I* Beantown? T.J.’s from Boston. Why isn’t *he* Beantown?”

“Because T.J. is slightly less annoying.”

We reached the edge of the woods. X and Halfborn guarded our backs, slowing down the pursuing horde. And the enemies *were* a horde now. All the scattered groups within sight had stopped fighting one another and were after us. Some pointed at me. Some called my name, and not in a friendly way.

“Yeah, they’ve spotted you.” Mallory sighed. “When I said I wanted to see you eviscerated, I didn’t mean I wanted to be standing *next* to you. Oh, well.”

I almost asked why everyone was after me. But I got it. I was a newbie. Of course the other einherjar would gang up on me and the other newcomers. Lars Ahlstrom was probably already decapitated. Dede might be running around with her arms cut off. The veteran einherjar would make this as painful and terrifying for us as possible to see how we handled ourselves. That made me angry.

We climbed the hill, weaving from tree to tree for cover. Halfborn threw himself into a group of twenty guys who were following us. He destroyed

them all. He came up laughing, an insane light in his eyes. He was bleeding from a dozen wounds. A dagger stuck out of his chest, right over his heart.

“How is he not dead yet?” I asked.

“He’s a berserker.” Mallory glanced back, her expression a mix of disdain and exasperation and something else...admiration? “That idiot will keep fighting until he is literally hacked to pieces.”

Something clicked in my head. Mallory *liked* Halfborn. You don’t call somebody an idiot that many times unless you’re really into them. Under different circumstances, I might have teased her, but while she was distracted there was a wet *thwack*. An arrow sprouted from her neck.

She scowled at me as if to say, *Totally your fault.*

She collapsed. I knelt at her side, putting my hand on her neck. I could feel the life seeping out of her. I could sense the severed artery, the fading heartbeat, all the damage that had to be mended. My fingers seemed to grow warmer. If I had a little more time—

“Look out!” shouted X.

I raised my shield. A sword clanged against it. I pushed back, knocking the attacker downhill. My arms ached. My head was throbbing, but somehow I got to my feet.

Halfborn was forty yards away, surrounded by a mob of warriors all jabbing him with spears, shooting him full of arrows. Somehow he kept fighting, but even *he* wouldn’t be able to stand much longer.

X ripped a guy’s AK-47 out of his hands and smacked him over the head with it.

“Go, Magnus Beantown,” said the half-troll. “Take the crest for floor nineteen!”

“My nickname will not be Beantown,” I muttered. “I refuse.”

I stumbled uphill until I reached the summit. I put my back against a big oak tree while X smashed and backhanded and head-butted Vikings into oblivion.

An arrow hit my shoulder, pinning me to the tree. The pain almost made me black out, but I snapped the shaft and pulled myself free. The bleeding stopped instantly. I felt the wound closing as if somebody had filled it with hot wax.

A shadow passed over me—something large and dark hurtling from the sky. It took me a millisecond to realize it was a boulder, probably shot from

a balcony catapult. It took me another millisecond to realize where it would land.

Too late. Before I could shout a warning to X, the half-troll and a dozen other einherjar disappeared under a twenty-ton chunk of limestone, the side of which was painted: WITH LOVE FROM FLOOR 63.

A hundred warriors stared at the rock. Leaves and broken twigs fluttered around them. Then the einherjar all turned toward me.

Another arrow hit me in the chest. I screamed, more in rage than in pain, and pulled it out.

“Wow,” one of the Vikings commented. “He’s a fast healer.”

“Try a spear,” someone suggested. “Try two spears.”

They spoke as if I wasn’t worth addressing—as if I were a cornered animal they could experiment with.

Twenty or thirty einherjar raised their weapons. The anger inside me exploded. I shouted, expelling energy like the shockwave from a bomb. Bowstrings snapped. Swords fell out of their owners’ hands. Spears and guns and axes went flying into the trees.

As quickly as it started, the surge of power shut off. All around me, a hundred einherjar had been stripped of their weapons.

The blue-painted guy stood in the front row, his baseball bat at his feet. He stared at me in shock. “What just happened?”

The warrior next to him had an eye patch and red leather armor decorated with silver curlicues. Cautiously, he crouched and retrieved his fallen ax.

“*Alf seidr*,” said Eye Patch. “Nicely done, son of Frey. I haven’t seen a trick like that in centuries. But bone steel is better.”

My eyes crossed as his ax blade spun toward my face. Then everything went dark.



## Come to the Dark Side. We Have Pop-Tarts

A FAMILIAR VOICE SAID, “Dead again, eh?”

I opened my eyes. I was standing in a pavilion ringed with gray stone columns. Outside was nothing but empty sky. The air was thin. Cold wind whipped across the marble floor, stirring the fire in the central hearth, making the flames gutter in the braziers on either side of the tall dais. Three steps led up to a double throne—a loveseat of white wood carved with intricate shapes of animals, birds, and tree branches. The seat itself was lined with ermine. Sprawling across it, eating Pop-Tarts from a silver wrapper, was the man in the Red Sox jersey.

“Welcome to *Hlidskjalf*.” He grinned, his scarred lips like the sides of a zipper. “The High Seat of Odin.”

“You’re not Odin,” I said, using process of elimination. “You’re Loki.”

Sox Man chuckled. “Nothing escapes your keen intellect.”

“First, what are we doing here? Second, why is Odin’s throne named Lid Scalp?”

“*Hlidskjalf*. Put an *h* at the beginning and an *f* at the end. On that first letter you have to sound like you’re hawking spit.”

“On further reflection, I don’t care.”

“You should. This is where it all started. That’s the answer to your second question—why we’re here.” He patted the seat next to him. “Join

me. Have a Pop-Tart.”

“Uh, no thanks.”

“Your loss.” He broke off the edge of a pastry and tossed it into his mouth. “This purple icing...I don’t know what flavor it’s supposed to be, but it is *insanely* good.”

My pulse throbbed in my neck, which was strange since I was dreaming, and probably also dead.

Loki’s eyes unnerved me. They had that same intense glow as Sam’s, but Sam kept the flames under control. Loki’s gaze flitted restlessly like the fire in the hearth, pushed by the wind, looking for anything it could set ablaze.

“Frey once sat here.” He stroked the ermine fur. “Do you know the story?”

“No, but...isn’t it illegal for anyone to sit there except Odin?”

“Oh, yes. Well, Odin and Frigg, the king and queen. They can sit here and see anywhere in the Nine Worlds. They merely have to concentrate and they will find whatever they are looking for. But if anyone else sits here...” He made *tsk-tsk* sounds. “The throne’s magic can be a terrible curse. *I* certainly would never risk it if this weren’t an illusion. But your father did. It was his one moment of rebellion.” Loki took another bite of purple Pop-Tart. “I always admired him for that.”

“And?”

“And instead of seeing what he was looking for, he saw what he most desired. It ruined his life. It’s the reason he lost his sword. He—” Loki winced. “Excuse me.”

He turned his head, his features contorting like he was about to sneeze. Then he let loose a scream of agony. When he faced me again, wisps of steam rose from the scar tissue across the bridge of his nose.

“Sorry,” he said. “Every so often the poison splashes in my eyes.”

“The poison.” I remembered a fragment of a myth. “You killed somebody. The gods captured you and tied you up. There was something about poison. Where are you now, really?”

He gave me that twisted grin. “Right where I always am. The gods had me, ah, properly restrained. But that’s not important. I can still send out splinters of my essence from time to time—like I’m doing now, to speak with my favorite friends!”

“Just because you’re wearing a Sox jersey does not mean we’re friends.”

“I’m hurt!” His eyes sparkled. “My daughter Samirah saw something in you. We could help each other.”

“You ordered her to take me to Valhalla?”

“Oh, no. That wasn’t my idea. You, Magnus Chase, are of interest to many different parties. Some of them are not as charming or helpful as I.”

“How about being charming and helpful to your daughter? She got kicked out of the Valkyries for choosing me.”

His smile faded. “That’s the gods for you. They banished me, too, and how many times did I save their hides? Don’t worry about Samirah. She is strong. She’ll be fine. I’m more worried about *you*.”

Cold wind blew through the pavilion, so strong it pushed me a few inches across the polished stone floor.

Loki crumpled his Pop-Tart wrapper. “You’ll be waking up soon. Before you go, some advice.”

“I don’t suppose I can refuse.”

“The Sword of Summer,” Loki said. “When your father sat on this throne, what he saw doomed him. He gave his sword away. It passed to his servant and messenger, Skirnir.”

For a moment I was back on the Longfellow Bridge, the sword humming in my hand as if trying to speak.

“Uncle Randolph mentioned Skirnir,” I said. “His descendant was in that shipwreck.”

Loki pantomimed wild applause. “And there the sword lay for a thousand years, waiting for someone to reclaim it—someone who had the right to wield the blade.”

“Me.”

“Ah, but you aren’t the only one who can use the sword. We know what will happen at Ragnarok. The Norns have told us our fates. Frey...poor Frey, because of the choices he made, will die at the hands of Surt. The lord of the fire giants will cut him down with his own lost sword.”

A spike of pain hit me between the eyes, right about where the einherji’s ax had killed me. “That’s why Surt wants the sword. So he’ll be ready for Ragnarok.”

“Not only that. He’ll use the sword to set in motion a chain of events to hasten Doomsday. In eight days, unless you stop him, he will cut loose my

son, the Wolf.”

“Your son...?” My arms were evaporating. My eyesight grew hazy. Too many questions crowded into my head. “Wait...aren’t you destined to fight against the gods at Ragnarok too?”

“Yes, but that was the *gods’* choice, not mine. The thing about fate, Magnus: even if we can’t change the big picture, our choices can alter the details. *That’s* how we rebel against destiny, how we make our mark. What will you choose to do?”

His image flickered. For a moment I saw him spread-eagle on a slab of stone, his wrists and ankles tied with slimy ropes, his body writhing in pain. Then I saw him in a hospital bed, a female doctor leaning over him, her hand resting gently on his forehead. She looked like an older version of Sam—curls of dark hair escaping from a scarlet headscarf, her mouth set tight with concern.

Loki appeared on the throne again, brushing Pop-Tart crumbs from his Red Sox jersey. “I won’t tell you what to do, Magnus. That’s the difference between me and the other gods. I’ll only ask you this question: when you get a chance to sit on Odin’s throne—and that day is coming—will you search for your heart’s desire, knowing it may doom you as it doomed your father? Think on that, son of Frey. Perhaps we’ll speak again, if you survive the next eight days.”

My dream changed. Loki vanished. The braziers burst, showering hot coals across the dais, and the High Seat of Odin erupted in flames. The clouds turned into rolling banks of volcanic ash. Above the burning throne, two glowing red eyes appeared in the smoke.

*YOU.* The voice of Surt washed over me like a flamethrower. *YOU HAVE ONLY DELAYED ME. YOU HAVE EARNED A MORE PAINFUL, MORE PERMANENT DEATH.*

I tried to speak. The heat sucked the oxygen from my lungs. My lips cracked and blistered.

Surt laughed. *THE WOLF THINKS YOU MAY STILL BE USEFUL. I DO NOT. WHEN WE MEET AGAIN, YOU WILL BURN, SON OF FREY. YOU AND YOUR FRIENDS WILL BE MY TINDER. YOU WILL START THE FIRE THAT BURNS THE NINE WORLDS.*

The smoke thickened. I couldn’t breathe, couldn’t see.

My eyes flew open. I bolted upright, gasping for air. I was in bed in my hotel room. Surt was gone. I touched my face, but it wasn’t burned. No ax

was embedded there. All my battlefield wounds had vanished.

Still, my whole body was buzzing with alarm. I felt like I'd fallen asleep on active train tracks and the Acela Express had just roared past.

The dream was already erasing itself. I struggled to hold on to the specifics: the throne of Odin; Loki and Pop-Tarts; *my son, the Wolf*; Surt promising to burn the Nine Worlds. Trying to make sense of it was even more painful than getting an ax in my face.

Someone knocked on my door.

Thinking it might be one of my hallmates, I leaped out of bed and ran to answer. I threw open the door, found myself face-to-face with the Valkyrie Gunilla, and only then realized I was wearing nothing but underwear.

Her face turned magenta. Her jaw muscles knotted. "Oh."

"Captain Gorilla," I said. "What an honor."

She recovered quickly, glaring at me like she was trying to activate her freeze-ray vision. "Magnus Chase. I, um—you resurrected with incredible speed."

From her tone, I guessed that she hadn't expected to find me here. But then why had she knocked?

"I wasn't timing my resurrection," I said. "Was it fast?"

"Very." She glanced past me, maybe looking for something. "We have a few hours before dinner. Perhaps I could give you a tour of the hotel, since your own Valkyrie has been dismissed."

"You mean since you *got* her dismissed."

Gunilla turned up her palms. "I don't control the Norns. They decide all our fates."

"That's convenient." I remembered what Loki had said: *Our choices can alter the details. That's how we rebel against destiny.* "What about me? Have you—I mean *the Norns*—decided my fate?"

Gunilla scowled. Her posture was stiff and uneasy. Something was bothering her—maybe even scaring her.

"The thanes are discussing your situation now." She unhooked the key ring from her belt. "Take a tour with me. We can talk. If I understand you better, I may be able to speak to the thanes on your behalf. Unless, of course, you want to take your chances without my help. You might get lucky. The thanes might sentence you to bellhop duty for a few centuries. Or washing dishes in the kitchen."

The last thing I wanted was quality time with Gunilla. On the other hand, a tour of the hotel might show me some important features—like the exits. Also, after the dream I'd just had, I didn't want to be alone.

Besides, I could imagine how many dirty dishes would need washing after three rounds of dinner in the feast hall.

"I'll take the tour," I said. "But I should probably put some clothes on first."



## Gunilla Gets Blowtorched and It's Not Funny. Okay, It's a Little Bit Funny

THE MAIN THING I discovered: Valhalla needed GPS. Even Gunilla got turned around in the endless corridors, banquet halls, gardens, and lounges.

At one point we were riding in a service elevator when Gunilla said, “Here’s the food court.”

The doors opened and a wall of flames engulfed us both.

My heart leaped into my throat. I thought Surt had found me. Gunilla screamed and staggered backward. I smashed random buttons until the doors shut. Then I did my best to put out the burning hem of Gunilla’s dress.

“You okay?” My pulse was still racing. Gunilla’s arms were covered with patches of steaming red skin.

“My skin will heal,” Gunilla said. “My pride may not. That—that was Muspellheim, not the food court.”

I wondered if Surt had engineered our little detour somehow, or if elevator doors in Valhalla often opened into the world of fire. I wasn’t sure which possibility was more disturbing.

The tightness in Gunilla’s voice told me how much pain she was in. I remembered standing over Mallory Keen when she fell in battle—the way

I'd been able to sense the damage and how it could be mended if I'd had more time.

I knelt next to the Valkyrie. "May I?"

"What are you—"

I touched her forearm.

My fingers began to steam, drawing the heat from her skin. The redness faded. Her burns disappeared. Even the singed tip of her nose healed.

Gunilla stared at me as if I'd sprouted horns. "How did you...? You weren't burned, either. How?"

"I don't know." My head spun with exhaustion. "Good luck? Healthy living?"

I tried to stand and promptly collapsed.

"Whoa, son of Frey." Gunilla grabbed my arm.

The elevator doors opened again. This time we really were at a food court. The smells of lemon chicken and pizza wafted in.

"Let's keep walking," Gunilla said. "Clear your head."

We got some strange looks as we stumbled through the dining area, me leaning against the Valkyrie captain for support, Gunilla's dress still smoking and tattered.

We turned into a corridor lined with conference rooms. Inside one, a guy in studded leather armor was giving a PowerPoint presentation to a dozen warriors, explaining the weaknesses of mountain trolls.

A few doors down, Valkyries in glittering party hats socialized over cake and ice cream. The birthday candle was shaped like the number 500.

"I think I'm okay now," I told Gunilla. "Thanks."

I wobbled a few steps on my own but managed to stay upright.

"Your healing abilities are remarkable," Gunilla said. "Frey is the god of abundance and fertility, growth and vitality—I guess that explains it. Still, I've never seen an einherji who can heal himself so quickly, much less heal others."

"Your guess is as good as mine," I said. "Normally I have trouble just opening Band-Aids."

"And your immunity to fire?"

I concentrated on the carpet designs, keeping one foot in front of the other. I could walk now, but healing Gunilla's burns had left me feeling like I'd just had a bad case of pneumonia.

“I don’t think it’s fire immunity,” I said. “I’ve burned myself before. I just...I have a high tolerance for extreme temperatures. Cold. Heat. The same thing happened on the Longfellow Bridge when I walked into the flames...” My voice faltered. I remembered that Gunilla had edited that video and made me look like a fool. “But you know all about that.”

Gunilla didn’t seem to notice the sarcasm. She absently stroked one of the hammers in her bandolier as if it were a kitten. “Perhaps....In the beginning of creation, only two worlds existed: Muspellheim and Niflheim, fire and ice. Life rose between those extremes. Frey is the god of moderate climes and the growing season. He represents the middle ground. Perhaps that’s why you can resist heat and cold.” She shook her head. “I don’t know, Magnus Chase. It has been a long time since I met a child of Frey.”

“Why? Are we not allowed in Valhalla?”

“Oh, we have some children of Frey from the old days. The kings of Sweden were his descendants, for instance. But we haven’t seen a new one in Valhalla for centuries. Frey is Vanir, for one thing.”

“Is that bad? Surt called me *Vanir-spawn*.”

“That wasn’t Surt.”

I thought about my dream: those glowing eyes in the smoke. “It was Surt.”

Gunilla looked like she wanted to argue, but she let it drop. “Whatever the case, the gods are divided into two tribes. The Aesir are mostly gods of war: Odin, Thor, Tyr, and the rest. The Vanir are more like the gods of nature: Frey, Freya, their father, Njord. That’s an oversimplification, but anyway—long ago, the two tribes had a war. They almost destroyed the Nine Worlds. They finally settled their differences. They intermarried. They joined forces against the giants. But still they’re different clans. Some Vanir have palaces in Asgard, the seat of the Aesir gods, but the Vanir also have their own world, Vanaheim. When a child of the Vanir dies bravely, they don’t usually go to Valhalla. More often they go to the Vanir afterlife, overseen by the goddess Freya.”

It took me a minute to digest all that. Clans of gods. Wars. Whatever. But that last part, *the Vanir afterlife*... “You’re telling me there’s another place like Valhalla, except for Vanir children, and I’m not there? What if that’s where my mom went? What if I was supposed to—”

Gunilla took my arm. Her blue eyes were intense with anger. “That’s right, Magnus. Think about what Samirah al-Abbas has done. I’m not

saying *all* children of the Vanir go to Folkvanger—”

“You put them in a Volkswagen?”

“*Folkvanger*. It’s the name of Freya’s hall for the slain.”

“Oh.”

“My point is, you could have gone there. It would’ve been more likely. Half the honored dead go to Odin. Half go to Freya. That was part of the agreement that ended the gods’ war eons ago. So why did Samirah bring you here? *Wrongly chosen, wrongly slain.* She’s the daughter of Loki, the father of evil. She cannot be trusted.”

I wasn’t sure how to answer. I hadn’t known Samirah all that long, but she seemed pretty nice. Of course, so did her dad, Loki....

“You may not believe this,” Gunilla said, “but I’m giving you the benefit of the doubt. I think you may be innocent of Samirah’s plans.”

“What plans?”

She laughed bitterly. “To hasten Doomsday, of course. To bring the war before we are ready. That’s what Loki wants.”

I was tempted to protest that Loki had told me otherwise. He seemed more interested in *stopping* Surt from getting my dad’s sword....But I decided it wouldn’t be wise to tell Gunilla I’d been having chats with the father of evil.

“If you hate Sam so much,” I said, “why did you let her be a Valkyrie in the first place?”

“That wasn’t my choice. I oversee the Valkyries, but Odin picks them. Samirah al-Abbas was the last Valkyrie he chose, two years ago, under what were...unusual circumstances. The All-Father has not appeared in Valhalla since.”

“You think Sam killed him?”

I meant it as a joke, but Gunilla actually seemed to consider it. “I think Samirah should never have been chosen as a Valkyrie. I think she’s working for her father as a spy and a saboteur. Getting her kicked out of Valhalla was the best thing I ever did.”

“Wow.”

“Magnus, you don’t know her. There was another child of Loki here once. He—he wasn’t what he seemed. He—” She stopped herself, looking like someone had just stepped on her heart. “Never mind. I swore to myself I wouldn’t be fooled again. I intend to delay Ragnarok for as long as possible.”

The edge of fear had crept back into her voice. She didn't sound much like the daughter of a war god.

"Why delay?" I asked. "Isn't Ragnarok what you're all training for? It's like your big graduation party."

"You don't understand," she said. "Come. There's something I need to show you. We will go through the gift shop."

When she said *gift shop*, I imagined a glorified closet selling cheap Valhalla souvenirs. Instead, it was a five-level department store combined with a convention center trade show. We passed through a supermarket, a clothing boutique with the latest in Viking fashions, and an IKEA outlet (naturally).

Most of the showroom floor was a maze of stalls, kiosks, and workshops. Bearded guys in leather aprons stood outside their forges offering free samples of arrowheads. There were specialized merchants for shields, spears, crossbows, helmets, and drinking cups (lots and lots of drinking cups). Several of the larger booths had full-size boats for sale.

I patted the hull of a sixty-foot warship. "I don't think this would fit in my bathtub."

"We have several lakes and rivers in Valhalla," Gunilla said. "There's also the Whitewater Rafting Experience on floor twelve. All einherjar should know how to fight at sea as well as on land."

I pointed to a riding ring where a dozen horses were tethered. "And those? You can ride a horse through the hallways?"

"Of course," said Gunilla. "We're pet-friendly. But notice, Magnus—the lack of weapons. The scarcity of armor."

"You're kidding, right? This place has *thousands* of weapons for sale."

"Not enough," Gunilla said. "Not for Ragnarok."

She led me down the Nordic Knickknacks aisle to a big iron door marked: AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY.

She slipped one of her keys into the lock. "I don't show this to many people. It's too disturbing."

"Not another wall of fire, is it?"

"Worse."

Behind the door was a set of stairs. Then another set of stairs. Then another set of stairs. By the time we reached the top, I'd lost count of how many flights. My upgraded einherji legs felt like overcooked linguine.

At last we stepped out onto a narrow balcony.

“This,” Gunilla said, “is my favorite view.”

I couldn’t answer. I was too busy trying not to die from vertigo.

The balcony ringed the opening in the roof above the Hall of the Slain.

The tree Laeradr’s topmost branches stretched upward, making a green dome the size of Spaceship Earth at Epcot Center. Inside, far below, hotel staff scurried around the tables like termites, getting things ready for dinner.

From the outer edge of the balcony, the roofline of Valhalla sloped away —a thatch-work of gold shields blazing red in the evening sun. I felt like I was standing on the surface of a metal planet.

“Why don’t you show this to people?” I asked. “It’s...well, intimidating, but it’s also beautiful.”

“Over here.” Gunilla pulled me to a spot where I could gaze down between two sections of roof.

My eyeballs felt like they were going to implode. I flashed back to a presentation my sixth grade science teacher once gave about the size of the universe. He explained how vast the earth was, then described how that was nothing compared to the solar system, which in turn was nothing compared to the galaxy, et cetera, et cetera, until I felt as significant as a speck on the underarm of a flea.

Stretching out around Valhalla, gleaming to the horizon, was a city of palaces, each as big and impressive as the hotel.

“Asgard,” Gunilla said. “The realm of the gods.”

I saw roofs made entirely of silver ingots, hammered bronze doors big enough to fly a B-1 bomber through, sturdy stone towers that pierced the clouds. Streets were paved in gold. Each garden was as vast as Boston Harbor. And circling the edge of the city were white ramparts that made the Great Wall of China look like a baby fence.

At the very edge of my vision, the city’s widest avenue ran through a gateway in the walls. On the far side, the pavement dissolved into multicolored light—a roadway of prismatic fire.

“The Bifrost,” Gunilla said. “The rainbow bridge leading from Asgard to Midgard.”

I’d heard about the Bifrost Bridge. In my children’s myth book, it was a seven-color pastel arc with happy bunny rabbits dancing around the base. *This* bridge had no happy bunnies. It was terrifying. It was a rainbow in the way a nuclear explosion was a mushroom.

“Only the gods may cross over,” Gunilla said. “Anyone else would burn the moment they set foot on it.”

“But...we’re *in* Asgard?”

“Of course. Valhalla is one of Odin’s halls. That’s why, within the hotel, the einherjar are immortal.”

“So you can go down there and see the gods, sell Girl Scout cookies door-to-door or whatever?”

Gunilla curled her lip. “Even gazing upon Asgard, you have no sense of reverence.”

“Not really, no.”

“Without the express permission of Odin, we aren’t allowed to visit the city of the gods, at least not until the day of Ragnarok, when we will defend the gates.”

“But you can fly.”

“It’s forbidden to go there. If I tried, I would fall from the sky. You’re missing the point, Magnus. Look at the city again. What do you notice?”

I scanned the neighborhood, trying to see past all the silver and gold and the scary huge architecture. In one window, rich drapes hung in tatters. Along the streets, fire braziers stood empty and cold. The statues in one garden were completely overgrown with thorn bushes. The streets were deserted. No fires burned in any of the windows.

“Where is everybody?” I asked.

“Exactly. I would not be selling many Girl Scout cookies.”

“You mean the gods are *gone*? ”

Gunilla turned toward me, her string of hammers glinting orange in the sunset. “Some may be slumbering. Some are roaming the Nine Worlds. Some still appear from time to time. The fact is, we don’t know what’s going on. I’ve been in Valhalla five hundred years, and I have never seen the gods so quiet, so inactive. The last two years...”

She plucked a leaf from a low-hanging branch of Laeradr. “Two years ago, something changed. The Valkyries and thanes all felt it. The barriers between the Nine Worlds began to weaken. Frost giants and fire giants raided Midgard more frequently. Monsters from Helheim broke into the worlds of the living. The gods grew distant and silent. This was around the time when Samirah became a Valkyrie—the last time we saw Odin. It was also when your mother died.”

A raven circled overhead. Two more joined it. I thought about my mom —how she used to joke that birds of prey were stalking us when we went hiking. *They think we're dead. Quick, start dancing!*

At the moment I wasn't tempted to dance. I wanted to borrow Gunilla's hammers and knock the birds out of the sky.

"You think there's a connection between those things?" I asked.

"All I know...we are poorly prepared for Ragnarok. Then *you* arrive. The Norns issue dire warnings, calling you the Harbinger of the Wolf. That's not good, Magnus. Samirah al-Abbas may have been watching you for years, waiting for the right moment to insert you into Valhalla."

"*Insert me?*"

"Those two friends of yours on the bridge, the ones who had been monitoring you since you became homeless, perhaps they were working with her."

"You mean Blitz and Hearth? They're homeless guys."

"Are they? Don't you find it strange they looked after you so carefully?"

I wanted to tell her to go to Helheim, but Blitz and Hearth *had* always seemed a little...unusual. Then again, when you live on the streets, the definition of normal gets a little fuzzy.

Gunilla took my arm. "Magnus, I didn't believe it at first, but if that *was* Surt on the bridge, if you *did* find the Sword of Summer...then you're being used by the forces of evil. If Samirah al-Abbas wants you to retrieve the sword, then that's exactly what you *cannot* do. Stay in Valhalla. Let the thanes deal with this prophecy. Swear you'll do this, and I will speak to the thanes on your behalf. I'll convince them that you can be trusted."

"Do I detect an *or else?*?"

"Only this: by tomorrow morning, the thanes will announce their decision regarding your fate. If we *cannot* trust you, then we will have to take precautions. We must know whose side you're on."

I looked down at the empty golden streets. I thought about Sam al-Abbas dragging me through the cold void, putting her career on the line because she thought I was brave. *You have potential, Magnus Chase. Don't prove me wrong.* Then she'd been vaporized in the feast hall thanks to Gunilla's edited blooper reel.

I pulled my arm away. "You said Frey is about the middle ground between fire and ice. Maybe this isn't about choosing sides. Maybe I don't

want to pick an extreme.”

Gunilla’s expression rolled shut like a storm window. “I can be a powerful enemy, Magnus Chase. I will warn you one time: if you follow the plans of Loki, if you seek to hasten Ragnarok, I will destroy you.”

I tried to meet her eyes, and to ignore my lungs flopping around in my chest. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Below us, the dinner horn echoed through the feast hall.

“The tour is over,” Gunilla announced. “From this point on, Magnus Chase, I will guide you no more.”

She leaped over the side of the balcony and flew down through the branches, leaving me to find my own way back. Without GPS.



## My Friends Fall Out of a Tree

FORTUNATELY, a friendly berserker found me wandering through the spa on the hundred and twelfth floor. He'd just gotten the gentleman's pedicure ("Just Because You Kill People Doesn't Mean Your Feet Should!") and was happy to lead me back to the elevators.

By the time I reached the feast hall, dinner was under way. I navigated toward X—who was hard to miss even in the huge crowd—and joined my hallmates from floor nineteen.

We traded stories about the morning's battle.

"I hear you used *alf seidr*!" Halfborn said. "Impressive!"

I'd almost forgotten about the energy blast that had knocked everybody's weapons away. "Yeah, uh...what exactly is *alf seidr*?"

"Elf magic," Mallory said. "Sneaky Vanir-style witchcraft unfit for a true warrior." She punched me in the arm. "I like you better already."

I tried for a smile, though I wasn't sure how I'd managed to wield elf magic. As far as I knew, I was not an elf. I thought about the way I resisted extreme temperatures, and the way I'd healed Gunilla in the elevator...was that *alf seidr* too? Maybe it came from being a son of Frey, though I didn't understand how the powers were related.

T.J. complimented me on taking the crest of the hill. X complimented me on staying alive longer than five minutes.

It was good to feel like part of the group, but I didn't pay much attention to their conversation. My head was still buzzing from the tour with Gunilla, and the dream of Loki at the throne of Odin.

At the head table, Gunilla occasionally murmured something to Helgi, and the manager would scowl in my direction. I kept waiting for him to call me up and put me on grape-peeling duty with Hunding, but I guess he was contemplating some better punishment.

*Tomorrow morning, Gunilla had warned, we will have to take precautions.*

At the end of dinner, a couple of newbies were welcomed to Valhalla. Their videos were suitably heroic. No Norns showed up. No Valkyries got banished in disgrace. No butts were shot with squeaky arrows.

As the crowds filed out of the feast hall, T.J. clapped me on the shoulder. "Get some rest. Another glorious death tomorrow!"

"Yippee," I said.

Back in my room, I couldn't sleep. I spent hours pacing around like a zoo animal. I didn't want to wait for the thanes' judgment in the morning. I'd seen how wisely they judged when they exiled Sam.

But what choice did I have? Sneak around the hotel randomly opening doors, hoping to find one that led back to Boston? Even if I succeeded, there was no guarantee I'd be allowed to go back to my luxurious life as a homeless kid. Gunilla or Surt or some other Norse nasty might track me down again.

*We must know whose side you are on,* Gunilla had said.

I was on my side. I didn't want to get wrapped up in some Viking Doomsday, but something told me it was too late. My mom had died two years ago, around the same time a bunch of other bad stuff was breaking loose in the Nine Worlds. With my luck, there was a connection. If I wanted justice for my mother—if I wanted to find out what had happened to her—I couldn't go back to hiding under a bridge.

I also couldn't keep hanging out in Valhalla, taking Swedish lessons and watching PowerPoint presentations on killing trolls.

At about five in the morning, I finally gave up on sleeping. I went to the restroom to wash my face. Clean towels hung on the rod. The hole in the wall had been repaired. I wondered if it had been done by magic or if some poor schmuck had had to fix it as a punishment from the thanes. Maybe tomorrow I'd be the one plastering drywall.

I walked to the atrium and stared at the stars through the trees. I wondered what sky I was looking at—what world, what constellations.

The branches rustled. Something dark and man-shaped toppled out of the tree. He landed at my feet with a nasty crunch.

“OW!” he wailed. “Stupid gravity!”

My old buddy Blitz lay on his back, moaning and cradling his left arm.

A second person dropped lightly to the grass—Hearth, dressed in his usual black leather clothes and candy-striped scarf. He signed: *Hi*.

I stared at them. “What are you—how did you—?” I started to grin. I’d never been happier to see anyone.

“Arm!” Blitz yelped. “Broken!”

“Right.” I knelt, trying to focus. “I might be able to heal this.”

“*Might?*”

“Wait...did you get a makeover?”

“You’re asking about my *wardrobe*?”

“Well, yeah.” I’d never seen Blitz look so nice.

His chaotic hair had been washed and combed back. His beard was trimmed. His Cro-Magnon unibrow had been plucked and waxed. Only his zigzag nose had not been cosmetically corrected.

As for the clothes, he’d apparently robbed several high-end boutiques on Newbury Street. His boots were alligator leather. His black wool suit was tailored to fit his stocky five-feet-five frame and looked lovely with his dark skin tone. Under the jacket, he was rocking a charcoal paisley vest with a gold watch chain, a turquoise dress shirt, and a bolo tie. He looked like a very short, well-groomed African American cowboy hit man.

Hearth clapped to get my attention. He signed: *Arm. Fix?*

“Right. Sorry.” I placed my hand gently on Blitz’s forearm. I could feel the fracture under the skin. I willed it to mend. *Click.* Blitz yelped as the bone moved back into place.

“Try it now,” I said.

Blitz moved the arm. His expression changed from pain to surprise.  
“That actually worked!”

Hearth looked even more shocked. He signed, *Magic? How?*

“I’ve been wondering that myself,” I said. “Guys, don’t take this the wrong way, because I’m really glad to see you. But why are you falling out of my trees?”

"Kid," Blitz said, "for the past twenty-four hours we've been climbing all over the World Tree looking for you. We thought we found you last night, but—"

"I think you might have," I said. "Just before dawn I heard somebody moving in the branches."

Blitz turned to Hearth. "I *told* you that was the right room!"

Hearth rolled his eyes and signed too fast for me to read.

"Oh, please," Blitz said. "Your idea, my idea—it doesn't matter. The point is, we're here, and Magnus is alive! Well...technically he's dead. But he's alive. Which means the boss might not kill us!"

"The boss?" I asked.

Blitz developed a tic in his eye. "Yeah. We have a confession to make."

"You're not really homeless," I said. "Last night, one of the thanes saw you guys on video and—"

*Video?* Hearth signed.

"Yeah. Valkyrie Vision. Anyway, this thane called you a dwarf and an elf. I'm guessing"—I pointed at Blitz—"you're the dwarf?"

"Typical," Blitz grumbled. "Assume I'm the dwarf because I'm short."

"So you're not the dwarf?"

He sighed. "No. I'm the dwarf."

"And you..." I looked at Hearth, but I couldn't even make myself say it. I'd hung out with this guy for two years. He'd taught me curses in sign language. We'd eaten burritos out of trash cans together. What kind of elf does that?

*E-L-F.* Hearth signed the individual letters. *Sometimes spelled A-L-F.*

"But...you guys don't look that different from humans."

"Actually," Blitz said, "humans don't look that different from dwarves and elves."

"I can't believe I'm having this conversation, but you're not *that* short. Like, for a dwarf. You could pass for a regular short human."

"Which I've been doing," Blitz said, "for two years now. Dwarves come in different sizes, just like humans. I happen to be a *svartalf*."

"A fart elf?"

"Gah! Clean your ears, kid. A *svartalf*. It means *dark elf*. I'm from *Svartalfheim*."

"Um, I thought you just said you're a dwarf."

“Dark elves aren’t actually elves, kid. It’s...what do you call it? A misnomer. We’re a subset of dwarves.”

“Well, that certainly clears things up.”

Hearth developed a faint smile, which for him was the equivalent of rolling on the floor laughing. He signed, *fart elf*.

Blitz pointedly ignored him. “Svartalfs tend to be taller than your average Nidavellir dwarves. Plus we’re devilishly handsome. But that’s not important right now. Hearthstone and I are here to help you.”

“Hearthstone?”

Hearth nodded. *My full name. He is B-L-I-T-Z-E-N.*

“Kid, we don’t have much time. We’ve been watching you for the last two years, trying to keep you safe.”

“For your boss.”

“That’s right.”

“And who is your boss?”

“That’s...classified. But he’s one of the good guys. He’s the head of our organization, dedicated to delaying Ragnarok as long as possible. And you, my friend, have been his most important project.”

“So, just taking a wild guess here...you’re not working for Loki?”

Blitzen looked outraged. Hearth signed one of those curses he’d taught me.

“That was uncalled for, kid.” Blitzen sounded genuinely hurt. “I dressed up like a homeless person every day for two years for you. I let my personal hygiene go to Helheim. You know how long I had to stay in the bubble bath every morning to get the *smell* out?”

“Sorry. So...were you working with Samirah, the Valkyrie?”

Another curse sign from Hearthstone. *The one who took you? No. She made things hard for us.*

Actually the literal signs were more like: *HER. TOOK. YOU. MADE. DIFFICULT. US.* But I’d gotten fairly good at interpreting.

“You weren’t supposed to die, kid,” said Blitzen. “Our job was to protect you. But now...well, you’re an einherji. Maybe we can still make this work. We’ve got to get you out of here. We have to find that sword.”

“Let’s go, then,” I said.

“Now, don’t argue,” Blitzen said. “I know you’re in warriors’ paradise and it’s all very new and exciting—”

“Blitz, I said sure.”

The dwarf blinked. “But I had this whole speech prepared.”

“No need. I trust you.”

The strange thing? I was telling the truth.

Maybe Blitzen and Hearthstone were professional stalkers who’d been keeping an eye on me for a top-secret anti-Ragnarok organization. Maybe their idea of protecting me involved attacking the lord of the fire giants with cheap plastic toys. Maybe they weren’t even the same species as me.

But they’d stuck by me while I was homeless. They were my best friends. Yes...that’s how messed up my life was.

“Well, then.” Blitzen brushed the grass from his paisley vest. “We’ll just climb back into the World Tree before—”

From somewhere above, an explosive *yap!* reverberated through the room. It sounded like a rabid six-thousand-pound Boston terrier choking on a mammoth bone.

Hearthstone’s eyes widened. The sound was so loud he’d probably felt the vibrations through his shoes.

“Gods almighty!” Blitzen grabbed my arm. Together with Hearthstone, he pulled me away from the atrium. “Kid, please tell me you know another way out of this hotel. Because we *aren’t* using the tree.”

Another *yap* shook the room. Broken branches tumbled to the floor.

“Wh-what’s up there?” I asked, my knees shaking. I thought about the Norns’ prophecy, naming me a harbinger of evil. “Is it—the Wolf?”

“Oh, much worse,” Blitzen said. “It’s the Squirrel.”



## I Recycle Myself

WHEN SOMEONE SAYS, *It's the Squirrel*, you don't ask questions. You run. The barking alone was enough to scare the mead out of me.

I grabbed my hotel-issued sword on the way out. Since I was wearing green silk Valhalla pajamas, I doubted I would need it. If I had to fight anyone, they would die laughing before I ever drew the blade.

We burst into the hallway to find T.J. and Mallory already standing there, bleary-eyed and hastily dressed.

"What was that sound?" Mallory scowled at me. "Why do you have a dwarf and an elf in your room?"

"SQUIRREL!" Blitzen yelled, slamming my door shut.

Hearth said the same thing in sign language—a gesture that looked disturbingly like a set of mandibles rending flesh.

T.J. looked like he'd been slapped across the face. "Magnus, what have you done?"

"I need to leave the hotel. Now. Please don't stop us."

Mallory cursed in what was maybe Gaelic. Our little hallway group was a veritable United Nations of Cussing.

"We won't stop you," she said. "This is going to get us laundry duty for a decade, but we'll help you."

I stared at her. "Why? You've known me less than a day."

“Long enough to know you’re an idiot,” she grumbled.

“What she’s trying to say,” T.J. offered, “is that hallmates always protect each other. We’ll cover your escape.”

The door of my room shook. Cracks spiderwebbed from the nameplate. A decorative spear fell off the wall of the corridor.

“X!” T.J. called. “Help!”

The half-troll’s door exploded off its hinges. X lumbered into the hallway as if he’d been standing just inside, waiting for the call. “Yes?”

T.J. pointed. “Magnus’s door. Squirrel.”

“Okay.”

X marched over and shoved his back against my door. It shuddered again, but X held firm. Enraged barking echoed from inside.

Halfborn Gunderson stumbled out of his room wearing nothing but smiley-face boxers, double-bladed axes in his hands.

“What’s going on?” He glowered at Blitz and Hearth. “Should I kill the dwarf and the elf?”

“No!” Blitzen yelped. “Don’t kill the dwarf and the elf!”

“They’re with me,” I said. “We’re leaving.”

“Squirrel,” T.J. explained.

Halfborn’s shaggy eyebrows achieved orbit. “Squirrel as in *squirrel squirrel?*”

“*Squirrel squirrel,*” Mallory agreed. “And I’m surrounded by moron morons.”

A raven soared down the hall. It landed on the nearest light fixture and squawked at me accusingly.

“Well, that’s great,” Mallory said. “The ravens have sensed your friends’ intrusion. That means the Valkyries won’t be far behind.”

From the direction of the elevator banks, half a dozen howls pierced the air.

“And those would be Odin’s wolves,” Halfborn said. “Very friendly unless you’re trespassing or leaving the hotel without permission, in which case they’ll tear you apart.”

An unmanly sob started to build in my throat. I could accept being killed by a squirrel, or an army of Valkyries, or even another ax in my face, but not wolves. My legs threatened to give out beneath me.

“Blitz and Hearth”—my voice trembled—“is there any alarm you guys failed to set off?”

*Not fair,* Hearth signed. *We avoided the tree mines.*

“*Tree* mines?” I wasn’t sure I’d understood him correctly.

Halfborn Gunderson hefted his ax. “I’ll slow down the wolves. Good luck, Magnus!”

He charged down the hall screaming, “DEATH!” while the smiley faces rippled on his boxer shorts.

Mallory’s face turned red—with embarrassment or delight, I couldn’t tell. “I’ll stay with X in case the squirrel breaks through,” she said. “T.J., you take them to recycling.”

“Yeah.”

“*Recycling?*” Blitz asked.

Mallory drew her sword. “Magnus, I can’t say it’s been a pleasure. You’re a true pain in the *nári*. Now get out of here.”

The door of my room shuddered again. Plaster rained from the ceiling.

“The squirrel is strong,” X grunted. “Hurry.”

T.J. fixed his bayonet. “Let’s go.”

He led us down the corridor, his blue Union jacket over his pj’s. I got a feeling he probably slept in that jacket. Behind us, wolves howled and Halfborn Gunderson bellowed in Old Norse.

As we ran, a few einherjar opened their doors to see what was going on. When they spotted T.J. with his bayonet, they ducked back inside.

Left, right, right, left—I lost track of the turns. Another raven shot past, cawing angrily. I tried to swat it.

“Don’t,” T.J. warned. “They’re sacred to Odin.”

We were just passing a T in the hallway when a voice shouted, “MAGNUS!”

I made the mistake of looking.

To our left, fifty feet away, Gunilla stood in full armor, a hammer in either hand. “Take another step,” she snarled, “and I will destroy you.”

T.J. glanced at me. “You three keep going. Next right, there’s a chute marked ‘recycling.’ Jump in.”

“But—”

“No time.” T.J. grinned. “Go kill some rebs for me—or monsters—or whatever.”

He pointed his rifle at the Valkyrie, shouted, “Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts!” and charged.

Hearth grabbed my arm and pulled me along. Blitz found the recycling chute and yanked it open. “GO, GO!”

Hearthstone dove in headfirst.

“You next, kid,” said the dwarf.

I hesitated. The smell coming out of the chute reminded me of my Dumpster-diving days. Suddenly the comforts of the Hotel Valhalla didn’t seem so bad.

Then more wolves howled, closer this time, and I recycled myself.



## You Had One Job

TURNS OUT VALHALLA had been sending its recycling to home plate at Fenway, which could explain any problems the Red Sox were having with their offensive lineup.

Hearthstone was just getting to his feet when I landed on top of him and knocked him flat. Before I could extricate myself, Blitzen plowed into my chest. I pushed him off and rolled away just in case anyone else decided to drop out of the sky.

I struggled to my feet. “Why are we in Fenway Park?”

“Don’t ask me.” Blitzen sighed dismally. His nice wool suit looked like it had passed through the digestive tract of a snail. “The doors in and out of Valhalla are notoriously wonky. At least we’re in Midgard.”

Rows of red bleachers stood empty and silent, uncomfortably similar to the Feast Hall of the Slain before the einherjar marched in. The field was covered in a patchwork of frozen tarps that crunched under my feet.

It must have been around six in the morning. The eastern sky was just starting to turn gray. My breath steamed in the air.

“What were we running from?” I asked. “What kind of mutant squirrel

—”

“Ratatosk,” Blitz said. “The bane of the World Tree. Anyone who dares climb Yggdrasil’s branches sooner or later has to deal with that monster.

Count yourself lucky we escaped.”

Hearthstone pointed toward the dawn. He signed: *Sun. Bad for Blitzen.*

Blitz squinted. “You’re right. After that business on the bridge, I can’t stand any more direct exposure.”

“What do you mean?” I looked more closely at his face. “Are you turning gray?”

Blitzen looked away, but there was no doubt. His cheeks had lightened to the color of wet clay. “Kid, you may have noticed I never hung around with you much during the day?”

“I...yeah. It was like Hearth took the day shift. You took the night shift.”

“Exactly. Dwarves are subterranean creatures. Sunlight is deadly to us. Mind you, not as deadly as it is to *trolls*. I can stand a little bit, but if I’m out for too long I start to...uh, petrify.”

I remembered the fight on Longfellow Bridge, how Blitzen had been wearing a broad-brimmed hat, coat, gloves, and sunglasses—a strange fashion statement, especially with the MAKE WAY FOR DUCKLINGS sign. “If you cover up, will you be okay?”

“It helps. Thick clothing, sunscreen, et cetera. But at the moment”—he gestured to his clothes—“I’m not prepared. I dropped my supply pack somewhere in the World Tree.”

Hearthstone signed: *After bridge, his legs turned to stone. No walking until night.*

A lump formed in my throat. Blitz and Hearth’s attempt to protect me on the Longfellow Bridge had been pretty ridiculous, but they’d *tried*. Just by being out in the daytime, Blitzen had risked his life.

As many questions as I had, as messed up as my life (death?) was at the moment, knowing that Blitzen was in danger again for my sake readjusted my priorities.

“Let’s get you someplace dark,” I said.

The easiest option was the Green Monster—the famous home-run-blocking four-story wall along the left outfield. I’d been behind it once before on a school trip—first grade, maybe? I remembered there were service doors under the scoreboard.

I found one unlocked, and we slipped inside.

There wasn’t much to see—just metal scaffolding, stacks of green number cards hanging on the wall, and the stadium’s concrete ribs tattooed

with a hundred years of graffiti. The space had one important requirement, though: it was dark.

Blitzen sat on a pile of mats and pulled off his boots. Acorns spilled out. His socks were gray paisley, matching his vest.

The socks amazed me as much as anything I'd encountered in Valhalla. "Blitz, what's with the outfit? You look so...spiffy."

He puffed up his chest. "Thank you, Magnus. It hasn't been easy dressing like a bum the last two years. No offense, of course."

"Of course."

"This is how I usually dress. I take my appearance very seriously. I'll admit I'm a bit of a clotheshorse."

Hearth made a sound between a sneeze and a snort. He signed: *A bit?*

"Oh, be quiet," Blitz grumbled. "Who bought you that scarf, eh?" He turned to me for support. "I told Hearth he needed a splash of color. The black clothes. The platinum blond hair. The red-striped scarf makes a bold statement, don't you think?"

"Uh...sure," I said. "As long as *I* don't have to wear it. Or the paisley socks."

"Don't be silly. Patterned fabric would look terrible on you." Blitz frowned at his boot. "What were we talking about again?"

"How about why you've been watching me for the last two years?"

Hearth signed: *Told you. The boss.*

"Not Loki," I said. "Odin, then?"

Blitz laughed. "No. The Capo is even smarter than Odin. He likes to work behind the scenes, stay anonymous. He assigned us to watch you and, uh"—he cleared his throat—"keep you alive."

"Ah."

"Yeah." Blitzen shook the acorns out of his other boot. "We had one job. We failed. 'Keep him alive,' said the Capo. 'Watch him. Protect him if needed, but don't interfere with his choices. He's important to the plan.'"

"The plan."

"The Capo knows stuff. The future, for instance. He does his best to nudge events in the right direction, keep the Nine Worlds from spiraling into chaos and exploding."

"That sounds like a good plan."

"He told us you were the son of Frey. He didn't go into details, but he was very insistent: you were important, had to be protected. When you

died...well, I'm just glad we found you in Valhalla. Maybe all isn't lost. Now we've got to report to the Capo and get new orders."

Hearthstone signed: *And hope he doesn't kill us.*

"That, too." Blitzen didn't sound optimistic. "The thing is, Magnus, until we talk to the boss, I can't really go into many details."

"Even though I'm important to the plan."

*That's why we can't,* Hearth signed.

"What about what happened after I fell off the bridge? Can you tell me that?"

Blitz picked a leaf out of his beard. "Well, Surt disappeared into the water with you."

"It was Surt."

"Oh, yeah. And I gotta say, nice job with that. A mortal taking down the lord of the fire giants? Even if you died doing it, that was impressive."

"So...I killed him?"

*No such luck,* Hearth signed.

"Yeah," Blitz agreed. "But fire giants don't do well in icy water. I imagine the impact shocked him right back to Muspellheim. And cutting off his nose...that was brilliant. It'll take him a while to regain enough strength to travel between worlds."

*A few days,* Hearth guessed.

"Maybe longer," Blitz said.

I looked back and forth between them, two nonhumans discussing the mechanics of traveling between worlds the way somebody else might debate how long it would take to fix a carburetor.

"You guys got away okay, obviously," I said. "What about Randolph?"

Hearthstone wrinkled his nose. *Your uncle. Annoying, but fine.*

"Kid, you saved lives," Blitzen said. "There were a lot of injuries, a lot of damage, but no mortals died—um, except you. The last time Surt visited Midgard, it didn't go so well."

*Great Chicago Fire,* Hearth signed.

"Yeah," said Blitz. "Anyway, the Boston explosions made national news. The humans are still investigating. They're speculating the damage was caused by meteor strikes."

I remember thinking that myself at first. And later wondering whether Surt had been responsible for them all. "But dozens of people saw Surt on the bridge! At least one guy caught him on video."

Blitz shrugged. “You’d be amazed what mortals *don’t* see. Not just humans. Dwarves and elves are just as bad. Besides, giants are experts at glamour.”

“*Glamour*. I’m guessing you don’t mean fashion.”

“No. Giants are *horrible* at fashion. I mean glamour like illusions. Giants are magic by nature. They can manipulate your senses without even trying. One time a giant made Hearthstone think I was a warthog, and Hearth almost killed me.”

*No more about the warthog!* Hearthstone pleaded.

“So, anyway,” Blitz said, “you fell in the river and died. The emergency services retrieved your body, but—”

“My body...”

Hearthstone pulled a newspaper clipping from his jacket pocket and handed it to me.

I read my own obituary. There was my class picture from fifth grade—my hair in my eyes, my uncomfortable *why-am-I-here* smile, my ratty DROPKICK MURPHYS T-shirt. The obituary didn’t say much. Nothing about my two-year disappearance, my homelessness, my mom’s death. Just: *Untimely demise. Survived by two uncles and a cousin. Private service to be held.*

“But my body is here,” I said, touching my chest. “I *have* a body.”

“A new and improved body,” Blitz agreed, squeezing my biceps in admiration. “They retrieved your *old* body. Hearth and I did our own search of the river. There was no sign of Surt. Worse...there was no sign of the sword. If it’s not at the bottom of the river again—”

“Could Randolph have found it?” I asked.

Hearthstone shook his head. *We watched him. Doesn’t have it.*

“Then Surt has the sword,” I guessed.

Blitz shuddered. “Let’s not assume that. There’s still a chance it’s with your old body.”

“Why would it be?”

Blitz pointed to Hearth. “Ask him. He’s the expert at magic.”

*Hard to explain in signs*, Hearth gestured. *A magic sword stays with you. You claimed it.*

“But...I didn’t.”

*You summoned it*, Hearth signed. *Held it first, before Surt. Hope that means Surt didn’t get it. Don’t know why the sword didn’t go to Valhalla.*

“I wasn’t holding the sword when I hit the river,” I said. “It slipped out of my hand.”

“Ah.” Blitz nodded. “That might be why. Still, the sword would traditionally go into your grave, or get burned on your pyre. So there’s a decent chance it will materialize next to your dead body. We need to look in your coffin.”

My skin crawled. “You want me to go to my own funeral?”

Hearth signed: *No. We go before.*

“According to your obituary notice,” Blitz said, “your body is at the funeral home today for viewing hours. The service isn’t until tonight. If you go now, you should have the place to yourself. The building isn’t open yet, and you won’t exactly have mourners lining up outside.”

“Thanks a lot.”

Blitzen tugged on his boots. “I’ll go talk to the boss. On the way, I’ll pop by Svartalfheim and pick up some proper anti-sunlight supplies.”

“You’ll pop by the world of the dark elves?”

“Yeah. It’s not as hard as it sounds. I’ve had a lot of practice, and Boston is at the center of Yggdrasil. Slipping between worlds is easy here. One time Hearth and I stepped off a curb in Kendall Square and fell into Niflheim by accident.”

*That was cold,* Hearth signed.

“While I’m gone,” Blitz said, “Hearthstone will take you to the funeral home. I’ll meet you...where?”

*Arlington—nearest T stop,* Hearth signed.

“Good.” Blitzen stood. “Get that sword, kid...and be careful. Outside Valhalla, you can die like anybody else. The last thing we need to explain to the boss is *two* Magnus Chase corpses.”



## My Funeral Director Dresses Me Funny

ONE GOOD THING about being homeless: I knew where to find free clothes. Hearth and I raided a charity drop box on Charlesgate so I wouldn't have to walk around town in my pj's. Soon I was resplendent in stonewashed jeans, a hunting jacket, and a T-shirt peppered with holes. I looked more like Kurt Cobain than ever, except I doubt Cobain ever wore a shirt that read: WIGGLES ROCK & ROLL PRESCHOOL TOUR! The really disturbing thing was that they made shirts like that in my size.

I held up my hotel-issued sword. "Hearth, what about this? I doubt the cops will like me walking around with a three-foot blade."

*Glamour*, Hearth signed. *Attach it to your belt.*

As soon as I did, the weapon shrank and melted into a simple loop of chain, which was only slightly less fashionable than the Wiggles T-shirt.

"Great," I said. "Now my humiliation is complete."

*Still a sword*, Hearth signed. *Mortals are not good at seeing magical things. Between Ice and Fire is Mist, G-i-n-n-u-n-g-a-g-a-p. Obscures appearances. Hard to explain in signs.*

"Okay." I remembered what Gunilla had told me about the worlds forming between ice and fire, and how Frey represented the temperate zone between. Apparently, though, Frey's children didn't inherit an innate understanding of what the heck that meant.

I read my obituary again for the address of the funeral home. “Let’s go pay our respects to me.”

It was a long, cold walk. The temperature didn’t bother me, but Hearth shivered in his leather jacket. His lips were cracked and peeling. His nose was runny. From all the fantasy books and movies I had devoured in middle school, I’d gotten an impression of elves as noble creatures of unearthly beauty. Hearthstone looked more like an anemic college kid who hadn’t eaten in a few weeks.

Still...I began to notice non-human details about him. His pupils were strangely reflective, like a cat’s. Under his translucent skin, his veins were more green than blue. And despite his disheveled appearance, he didn’t reek like a normal homeless person—body odor, alcohol, stale grease. He smelled more like pine needles and woodsmoke. How had I not realized that before?

I wanted to ask him about elves, but walking and talking in sign language don’t mix. Nor could Hearth read lips very well on the move. I kind of liked that, actually. You couldn’t multitask while talking to him. The dialogue required one hundred percent focus. If all conversations were like that, I imagined people wouldn’t say so much stupid garbage.

We were passing Copley Square when he pulled me into the doorway of an office building.

*Gómez*, he signed. *Wait*.

Gómez was a beat cop who knew us by sight. He didn’t know my real name, but if he’d seen a recent picture of me on the news, I would have a hard time explaining why I wasn’t dead. Also, Gómez wasn’t the friendliest guy.

I tapped Hearth’s shoulder for attention. “What’s it like...where you’re from?”

Hearth’s expression turned guarded. *Alfheim not so different. Only brighter. No night.*

“No night...like ever?”

*No night. The first time I saw a sunset...*

He hesitated, then splayed both hands in front of his chest like he was having a heart attack: the sign for scared.

I tried to imagine living in a world where it was always daytime, then watching the sun disappear in a wash of blood-colored light on the horizon.

“That would be freaky,” I decided. “But don’t elves have stuff *humans* would be scared of? Like...alf seidr?”

A light kindled in Hearth’s eyes. *How do you know that term?*

“Uh...yesterday on the battlefield, somebody said I did it.” I told him about the blast that had knocked everyone’s weapons away. “And when I healed Blitz’s arm, or walked into that wall of flames on the Longfellow Bridge...I wondered if it was all the same kind of magic.”

Hearth seemed to take longer than usual to process my words.

*Not sure.* His gestures were smaller, more careful. *Alf seidr can be many things—usually peaceful magic. Healing. Growing. Stopping violence. It cannot be learned. Not like rune magic. You have alf seidr in your blood, or you do not. You are son of Frey. Maybe have some of his abilities.*

“Frey is an elf?”

Hearth shook his head. *Frey is the lord of Alfheim, our patron god. Vanir are close to elves. Vanir were the source of all alf seidr.*

“Past tense? Don’t elves still talk to trees and speak with birds and stuff?”

Hearth grunted with irritation. He peeked around the corner to check on our neighborhood policeman.

*Alfheim not like that, he signed. Not for centuries. Almost no one is born with alf seidr. No one practices magic. Most elves think Midgard is a myth. Humans live in castles and wear plate mail and tights.*

“Maybe a thousand years ago.”

Hearth nodded. *Back then, our worlds interacted more. Now, both worlds have changed. Elves spend most of their time staring at screens, watching funny pixie videos when they are supposed to be working.*

I wasn’t sure I’d interpreted his signs correctly—*pixie videos?*—but Alfheim sounded depressingly like Midgard.

“So you don’t know any more about magic than I do,” I said.

*I don’t know what it looked like in the old days. But I am trying to learn. I have given up everything to try.*

“What do you mean?”

He glanced around the corner again. *Gómez is gone. Come on.*

I wasn’t sure if he’d missed my question or he’d just chosen to ignore it.

The funeral home was near Washington and Charles, tucked in a row of Bay Village town houses that seemed lost among the newer concrete and

glass skyscrapers. A sign on the awning read: TWINING & SONS MEMORIAL SERVICES.

A display by the door listed upcoming viewings. The top one read: MAGNUS CHASE. The date was today, starting at ten A.M. The door was locked. The lights were off.

“Early for my own funeral,” I said. “Typical.”

My hands were shaking. The idea of seeing my dead self was more unnerving than actually dying. “So do we break in?”

*I'll try something,* Hearth signed.

From his coat, he pulled a leather pouch. The contents clattered with a familiar sound.

“Runestones,” I guessed. “You know how to use them?”

He shrugged like, *We're about to find out.* He took one stone and tapped it against the door handle. The lock clicked. The door swung open.

“Nice,” I said. “Would that work on any door?”

Hearth put away the pouch. I couldn't quite read his expression—a mixture of sadness and wariness.

*I'm learning,* he signed. *Only tried that once before, when I met Blitz.*

“How did you two—”

Hearth cut me off with a wave. *Blitz saved my life. Long story. You go inside. I will stand guard here. Dead human bodies...* He shuddered and shook his head.

So much for my elfish backup.

Inside, the funeral home smelled of moldering bouquets. The threadbare red carpet and dark wood paneling made the whole place feel like one giant coffin. I crept down the hallway and peeked into the first room.

It was a set up like a chapel: three stained glass windows on the back wall, rows of folding chairs facing an open coffin on a dais. I hated this already. I'd been raised nonreligious. I'd always considered myself an atheist.

So, of course, my punishment was to find out I was the son of a Norse deity, go to a Viking afterlife, and have an open-coffin memorial in a cheesy uni-faith chapel. If there was an Almighty God up there, a head honcho of the universe, He was totally laughing at me right now.

At the entrance of the room was a poster-size portrait of me, wreathed in black crepe paper. They'd chosen the same goofy fifth grade picture from

my elementary school yearbook. Next to it, on a small table, was a guest book.

I was tempted to pick up the pen and write the first entry:

*Thanks for coming to my funeral!—Magnus.*

Who would be here, anyway? Uncle Randolph? Maybe Frederick and Annabeth, if they were still in town. My old classmates from two years ago? Yeah, right. If the funeral home offered snacks, some of my homeless buddies might show up, but the only ones I really cared about were Blitzen and Hearthstone.

I realized I was procrastinating. I wasn't sure how long I'd been standing in the chapel doorway. I forced myself down the aisle.

When I saw my own face in the coffin, I nearly threw up.

Not because I'm *that* ugly, but because...well, you know how weird it is to hear your own voice on a recording? And how irritating it can be to see yourself in a photo if you don't think you look good? Okay, imagine seeing your actual body lying right in front of you. It was so real, and yet so *not* me.

My hair was shellacked to the sides of my head. My face was caked with makeup, probably to cover cuts and bruises. My mouth was fixed in a weird little smile that I never would've made in real life. I was dressed in a cheap-looking blue suit with a blue tie. I hated blue. My hands were clasped over my stomach, hiding the place where I'd been impaled by a molten piece of asphalt.

"No, no, no." I gripped the sides of the coffin.

The *wrongness* of it made me feel like my guts were burning all over again.

I'd always had an image of what would happen to my body after death. This wasn't it. My mom and I had a pact—which sounds creepy, but it really wasn't. She made me promise that when she died, I'd have her cremated. I'd scatter her ashes in the woods of the Blue Hills. If I died first, she promised she would do the same for me. Neither of us liked the idea of being embalmed, turned into some chemically stabilized exhibition, then buried in a box. We wanted to be in the sunshine and the fresh air and just kind of dissolve.

I hadn't been able to keep my promise to my mother. Now I was getting exactly the kind of funeral I didn't want.

My eyes watered. "I'm sorry, Mom."

I wanted to push over the coffin. I wanted to torch this place. But I had a job to do. *The sword.*

If it was in the coffin, it wasn't in plain sight. I held my breath and slipped my hand along the inside lining like I was searching for loose change. Nothing.

Thinking the sword might be hidden by a glamour, I stretched my arm over the coffin, trying to sense the blade's presence like I'd done on the Longfellow Bridge. No heat. No humming.

The only other option was to check under the body.

I looked down at Magnus 1.0. "Sorry, man."

I tried to tell myself the corpse was an inanimate object like a scarecrow. Not a real person. Certainly not me.

I rolled him to one side. He was heavier than I would've thought.

Nothing underneath but safety pins holding the coat in place. A label on the white lining read, 50% SATIN, 50% POLYESTER, PRODUCT OF TAIWAN.

I lowered the body back into place. Dead Magnus's hair was all messed up now. The left side bloomed like a bird-of-paradise flower. My hands had come unclasped so I appeared to be giving everybody the finger.

"Much better," I decided. "At least that looks like me."

Behind me, a broken voice said, "Magnus?"

I almost jumped out of my Wiggles shirt.

Standing in the doorway was my cousin Annabeth.



## Hey, I Know You're Dead, But Call Me Maybe

EVEN IF I HADN'T seen her in the park two days before, I would've recognized her up close. Her wavy blond hair hadn't changed since childhood. Her gray eyes had the same determined look—like she'd chosen a target in the distance and was going to march over and destroy it. She was better dressed than me—orange North Face ski jacket, black jeans, lace-up winter boots—but if people saw us together they would've mistaken us for brother and sister.

She stared at me, then at the coffin. Slowly her expression changed from shock to cold calculation.

“I knew it,” she said. “*I knew you weren’t dead.*”

She tackled me in a hug. As I may have mentioned, I’m not a big fan of physical contact, but after all I’d been through, a hug from Annabeth was enough to make me crumble.

“Yeah...um...” My voice turned ragged. I extracted myself as gently as I could and blinked tears out of my eyes. “It’s really good to see you.”

She wrinkled her nose at the corpse. “Are you going to make me ask? I thought you were dead, you butt.”

I couldn’t help smiling. It had been ten years since she’d called me a butt. We were overdue. “Hard to explain.”

“I guessed that much. The body is fake? You’re trying to convince everyone you died?”

“Uh...not exactly. It’s best if people think I’m dead, though. Because...” *Because I am dead, I thought. Because I went to Valhalla, and now I’m back with a dwarf and an elf!* How could I say that?

I glanced at the chapel doorway. “Wait...Did you pass an el—a guy on the way in? My friend was supposed to be keeping watch.”

“No. Nobody was out there. The front door was unlocked.”

My equilibrium tilted. “I should check—”

“Whoa. Not until I get some answers.”

“I—Honestly, I don’t know where to start. I’m in kind of a dangerous situation. I don’t want to get you involved.”

“Too late.” She crossed her arms. “And I know a lot about dangerous situations.”

Somehow, I believed her. Here I was, a reborn superwarrior from Valhalla, and Annabeth still intimidated me. The way she held herself, her steely confidence—I could tell she’d overcome some hard stuff, the same way I could tell which guys in the shelters were the most dangerous. I couldn’t just blow her off. But I also didn’t want to drag her into my mess.

“Randolph almost got killed on that bridge,” I said. “I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

She laughed without humor. “Randolph—I swear, I’m going to shove that cane of his...Never mind. He wouldn’t explain why he took you to the bridge. He kept talking about how you were in danger because of your birthday. He said he was trying to help. Something about our family history —”

“He told me about my father.”

Annabeth’s eyes darkened. “You never knew your dad.”

“Yeah. But apparently...” I shook my head. “Look, it would sound crazy. Just...there’s a connection between what happened on the bridge and what happened to my mom two years ago, and—and who my father is.”

Annabeth’s expression transformed. She looked as if she’d opened a window expecting to see a swimming pool and instead found the Pacific Ocean.

“Magnus...oh, gods.”

*Gods, I noted. Plural.*

She paced in front of my coffin, her hands tented like she was praying. “I should’ve known. Randolph kept rambling about how our family was special, how we attracted attention. But I had no idea you...” She froze, then grabbed my shoulders. “I’m so sorry I didn’t know sooner. I could’ve helped you.”

“Um, I’m not sure—”

“My dad’s flying back to California tonight after the funeral,” she continued. “I was going to catch the train for New York, but school can wait. I *get* it now. I can help you. I know a place where you’ll be safe.”

I pulled away.

I wasn’t sure what Annabeth knew, or what she thought she knew. Maybe she’d gotten mixed up with the Nine Worlds somehow. Maybe she was talking about something totally different. But every nerve in my body tingled with warning when I thought about telling her the truth.

I appreciated her offer of help. I could tell it was genuine. Still...those words: *I know a place where you’ll be safe*. Nothing activated the flight instincts of a homeless kid faster than hearing that.

I was trying to figure out how to explain that when Hearthstone stumbled into the chapel doorway. His left eye was swollen shut. He gesticulated so frantically I could barely read the signs: *HURRY. DANGER.*

Annabeth turned, following my gaze. “Who—”

“That’s my friend,” I said. “I really have to go. Listen, Annabeth...” I took her hands. “I have to do this by myself. It’s like...like a personal—”

“Quest?”

“I was going to say pain in the—yeah, *quest* works. If you really want to help me, please, just pretend you didn’t see me. Later, after I’m done, I’ll find you. I’ll explain everything, I promise. Right now, I have to go.”

She took a shaky breath. “Magnus, I probably *could* help. But...” She reached into her coat pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper. “Recently I learned the hard way that sometimes I have to step back and let other people do their own quests, even people I care about. At least take this.”

I unfolded the paper. It was one of the MISSING flyers she and Uncle Frederick had been handing out.

“The second number is my phone. Call me. Let me know when you’re okay, or if you change your mind and—”

“I’ll call.” I kissed her cheek. “You’re the best.”

She sighed. “You’re still a butt.”

“I know. Thanks. Bye.”

I ran to Hearthstone, who was bouncing up and down with impatience. “What happened?” I demanded. “Where were you?”

He was already running. I followed him out of the funeral home, north on Arlington. Even pouring on the speed with my upgraded einherji legs, I could barely keep up. Elves, I discovered, could run fast when they wanted to.

We reached the stairs to the T stop just as Blitzen was coming up. I recognized the wide-brimmed hat and coat from the Longfellow Bridge. He’d added larger sunglasses, a ski mask, leather gloves, and a scarf. In one hand he carried a black canvas bag. I guessed he was going for that *Invisible-Man-Goes-Bowling* look.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” Blitz grabbed Hearth to keep him from tumbling into traffic. “What happened to your eye? Did you guys find the sword?”

“No sword,” I gasped. “Hearth’s eye—I don’t know—something about danger.”

Hearth clapped for our attention.

*Knocked out, he signed. Girl jumped from second story of funeral home. Landed on me. I woke up in alley.*

“A girl in the funeral home?” I scowled. “You don’t mean Annabeth? She’s my cousin.”

He shook his head. *Not her. Other girl. She was*—His hands froze when he noticed Blitz’s bag.

Hearth stepped back, shaking his head in disbelief. *You brought him?* He spelled it out: H-I-M, so I knew I hadn’t misunderstood.

Blitz hefted the bag. His face was impossible to read, swaddled in anti-sunlight protection, but his voice was heavy. “Yeah. Capo’s orders. First things first. Magnus, your cousin was at the funeral home?”

“It’s okay.” I resisted the urge to ask why there was a *him* in the bowling bag. “Annabeth won’t say anything.”

“But...*another* girl was there?”

“I didn’t see her. I guess she heard me coming in and went upstairs.”

The dwarf turned to Hearth. “At which point, she jumped from the second-floor window, knocked you out, and got away?”

Hearth nodded. *She had to be looking for the sword.*

“You think she found it?” Blitz asked.

Hearth shook his head.

“How can you be sure?” I asked.

*Because she’s right there.*

Hearth pointed across Boylston. A quarter mile down Arlington Street, walking at a fast clip, was a girl in a brown peacoat and a green headscarf. I recognized that scarf.

Hearth’s swollen eye had been compliments of Samirah al-Abbas, my ex-Valkyrie.



## Let's Play Frisbee with Bladed Weapons!

AT THE NORTH END of the park, Sam crossed Beacon Street, heading for the footbridge over Storrow Drive.

“Where’s she going?” I asked.

“The river, obviously,” Blitz said. “She checked out your body at the funeral home—”

“Can we please not phrase it that way?”

“She didn’t find the sword. Now she’s checking the river.”

Sam climbed the spiral ramp of the footbridge. She glanced back in our direction and we had to hide behind a pile of dirty snow. During the summer tourist season, it would’ve been easier to follow her without attracting attention. Now, the sidewalks were mostly empty.

Blitzen adjusted his dark glasses. “I don’t like it. *Best case scenario*, the Valkyries sent her, but—”

“No,” I said. “She was kicked out of the Valkyries.”

I told them the story as we crouched behind our snow-bank.

Hearth looked aghast. His swollen eye had turned the color of Kermit the Frog. *Daughter of Loki?* he signed. *She’s working for her dad.*

“I don’t know,” I said. “I can’t quite believe that.”

*Because she saved you?*

I wasn't sure. Maybe I didn't want to believe she was playing for Team Evil. Maybe Loki's words had wormed their way into my head: *I'm definitely on your side!*

I pointed at Hearth's eye and signed *P* for *Permission?* I touched his eyelid. A spark of warmth passed through my fingertip. The bruising faded.

Blitz chuckled. "You're getting good at that, Magnus."

Hearthstone grabbed my hand. He studied my fingertips as if looking for residual magic.

"Whatever." I pulled my hand away, a little embarrassed. The last thing I wanted to be was Magnus Chase, Viking Paramedic. "We're losing Sam. Let's go."

Sam headed downstream on the Esplanade jogging trail. We crossed the footbridge. Beneath us, cars edged along bumper to bumper, honking incessantly. Judging from all the construction vehicles and flashing lights on the Longfellow Bridge, the traffic was probably my fault. My battle with Surt had completely closed the span.

We lost sight of Sam as we took the spiral ramp to the Esplanade. We walked past the playground. I figured we would spot her somewhere down the path, but she had disappeared.

"Well, that's just great," I said.

Blitz limped into the shadow of the closed concession stand. He looked like he was having trouble carrying his bowling bag.

"You okay?" I asked.

"Legs are just slightly petrified. Nothing to worry about."

"That sounds like something to worry about."

Hearth paced. *Wish I had a bow. I could have shot her.*

Blitzen shook his head. "Stick to magic, my friend."

Hearth's gestures were sharp with irritation. *Can't read your lips. The beard is bad enough. The ski mask—impossible.*

Blitz set down the bowling bag, then signed while he spoke. "Hearth is very good with runes. He knows more rune magic than any living mortal."

"Mortal like human?" I asked.

Blitz snorted. "Kid, humans aren't the only mortal species. I meant humans, dwarves, or elves. You can't count giants—they're weird. Or the gods, obviously. Or the soothsayers who live in Valhalla. I never understood what they were. But among the three mortal species, Hearthstone is the best

magician! Well, he's also the *only* magician, as far as I know. He's the first person in centuries to dedicate his life to magic."

*I'm blushing*, Hearthstone signed, clearly not blushing.

"My point is, you've got real talent," Blitz told him. "But still you want to be an archer!"

*Elves were great archers!* Hearth protested.

"A thousand years ago!" Blitzen chopped his hand twice between his opposite thumb and forefinger, the sign for *annoyed*. "Hearth is a romantic. He longs for the old days. He's the sort of elf who goes to Renaissance festivals."

Hearth grunted. *I went one time.*

"Guys," I said, "we have to find Sam."

*No point*, Hearth signed. *She'll search the river. Let her waste her time. We already looked.*

"What if we missed the sword?" Blitz asked. "What if she's got another way to find it?"

"It's not in the river," I said.

Blitz and Hearth both stared at me.

"You sure about that?" Blitz asked.

"I... Yeah. Don't ask me how, but now that I'm closer to the water..." I stared out over the Charles, its rippling gray lines etched with ice. "I feel the same as when I stood over my coffin. There's a kind of hollowness—like when you rattle a can and you can tell there's nothing inside. I just know—the sword isn't anywhere close."

"Rattling a can..." Blitzen mused. "Okay. I don't suppose you could direct us toward the cans we *should* be rattling?"

"That would be good," said Samirah al-Abbas.

She charged from behind the concession building and kicked me in the chest, propelling me backward into a tree. My lungs imploded like paper sacks. By the time I could see straight again, Blitzen was slumped against the wall. Hearth's bag of runestones had scattered across the pavement, and Sam was swinging her ax at him.

"Stop it!" I meant to yell, but it came out as more of a wheeze.

Hearth dodged the ax and tried to tackle her. Sam judo-flipped him over her knee. Hearth landed flat on his back.

Blitzen tried to get up. His hat was tilted sideways. His glasses had been knocked off, and the skin around his eyes was turning gray in the daylight.

Sam turned to ax-smack him. Anger roared through me. I reached for the chain on my belt. Instantly, it was a sword again. I pulled the blade and sent it spinning like a Frisbee. It clanged against Sam's ax, knocking the weapon from her hand, almost taking off her face in the process.

She stared at me in disbelief. "What the Helheim?"

"You started it!"

Hearth grabbed her ankle. Sam kicked him away.

"And stop kicking my elf!" I said.

Sam pushed back her headscarf, letting her dark hair sweep her shoulders. She crouched in a wrestler's stance, ready to take us all on. "So help me, Magnus, if I had my full powers, I would rip your soul from your body for all the trouble you've caused me."

"That's nice," I said. "Or you could tell us what you're doing here. Maybe we could help each other."

Blitzen snatched up his sunglasses. "Help *her*? Why would we help *her*? She knocked out Hearth at the funeral home! My eyes feel like chunks of quartz!"

"Well, maybe if you hadn't been stalking me," Sam said.

"Bah!" Blitzen readjusted his hat. "Nobody was stalking you, Valkyrie! We're looking for the same thing—the sword!"

Still lying on the ground, Hearth signed, *Somebody please kill her*.

"What's he doing?" Sam demanded. "Is he making rude elf gestures at me?"

"It's ASL," I said. "American Sign Language."

"Alf Sign Language," Blitz corrected.

"Anyway"—I raised my palms—"can we call a truce and talk? We can always go back to killing each other later."

Sam paced, muttering under her breath. She retrieved her ax and my sword.

*Nice job, Magnus, I told myself. Now she has all the weapons.*

She tossed the sword back to me. "I should never have chosen you for Valhalla."

Blitzen snorted. "On that, at least, we agree. If you hadn't interfered on the bridge—"

"Interfered?" Sam demanded. "Magnus was already dead when I chose him! You and the elf weren't doing him any good with your plastic sign and your squeaky arrows!"

Blitz stood straight, which didn't make him much taller. "I'll have you know my friend is a great rune caster."

"Really?" Samirah asked. "I didn't see him using magic on the bridge against Surt."

Hearthstone looked offended. *Would have. Got sidetracked.*

"Exactly," Blitz said. "And as for me, I have *many* skills, Valkyrie."

"For instance?"

"For instance, I could fix your disgraceful outfit. *No one* wears a brown peacoat with a green headscarf."

"A dwarf in sunglasses and a ski mask is giving me fashion advice."

"I have daylight issues!"

"Guys," I said, "stop, please. Thank you."

I helped Hearthstone to his feet. He scowled at Sam and began collecting his runestones.

"Okay," I said. "Sam, why are you looking for the sword?"

"Because it's my only chance! Because—" Her voice cracked. All the rage seemed to ebb out of her. "Because I honored your stupid bravery. I rewarded you with Valhalla. And it cost me *everything*. If I can find the sword, *maybe* the thanes will reinstate me. I can convince them that...that I'm not—"

"The daughter of Loki?" Blitzen asked, but his voice had lost some of its edge.

Sam lowered her ax. "I can't do anything about that. But I'm *not* working for my father. I'm loyal to Odin."

Hearthstone glanced at me skeptically, like, *Are you buying this?*

"I trust her," I said.

Blitz grunted. "Is this another rattle-the-can instinct?"

"Maybe," I said. "Look, we all want to find this sword, right? We want to keep it away from Surt."

"Assuming Surt doesn't already have it," Sam said. "Assuming we can figure out what's going on. Assuming the Norns' prophecy for you isn't as bad as it sounds—"

"One way to find out." Blitz held up the bowling ball bag.

Sam stepped away. "What's in there?"

Hearth made a claw and tapped it twice on his shoulder—the sign for boss.

“Answers,” Blitz said, “whether we want them or not. Let’s confer with the Capo.”



## Talk to the Face, 'Cause That's Pretty Much All He's Got

BLITZ LED US down the Esplanade, where a pier extended into an icy lagoon. At the base of the dock, a candy-striped pole listed sideways.

“This is where they do gondola rides in the summer,” I said. “I don’t think you’re going to find one now.”

“We just need water.” Blitz sat on the dock and unzipped the bowling bag.

“Oh, gods.” Sam peered inside. “Is that human hair?”

“Hair, yes,” Blitz said. “Human, no.”

“You mean...” She pressed her hand to her stomach. “You’re not serious. You work for *him*? You brought *him* here?”

“He insisted.” Blitz pushed down the sides of the bag, revealing...yep, a severed head. The most messed-up thing about that? After two days in Valhalla, I wasn’t even surprised.

The beheaded man’s face was shriveled like a month-old apple. Tufts of rust-colored hair clung to his scalp. His closed eyes were sunken and dark. His bearded jaw protruded bulldog style, revealing a crooked row of bottom teeth.

Blitz unceremoniously shoved the head in the water, bag and all.

“Dude,” I said, “the state river authority isn’t going to like that.”

The head bobbed on the surface of the lagoon. The water around it bubbled and swirled. The man's face inflated, his wrinkles softening, his skin turning pink. He opened his eyes.

Sam and Hearth both knelt. Sam elbowed me to take a knee.

"Lord Mimir," Sam said. "You honor us."

The head opened his mouth and spewed water. More came out of his nostrils, his ears, his tear ducts. He reminded me of a catfish dragged from the bottom of a lake.

"Man, I hate—" The head coughed more water. His eyes turned from chalk white to blue. "I hate traveling in that bag."

Blitzen bowed. "Sorry, Capo. It was that or the fish tank. And the fish tank breaks easily."

The head gurgled. He scanned the faces on the dock until he found me. "Son of Frey, I've come a long way to speak with you. Hope you appreciate it."

"You're the mysterious classified boss," I said. "Hearth and Blitz have been watching me for two years...because they got orders from a severed head?"

"Show some respect, boyo." Mimir's voice reminded me of the longshoremen down at the Union Hall—their lungs half nicotine, half seawater.

Hearth frowned at me. *Told you C-A-P-O. Capo means head. Why surprised?*

"I am Mimir," said the head. "Once I was mighty among the Aesir. Then came the war with the Vanir. Now I got my own operation."

His face was so ugly it was hard to tell whether he was giving me an ugly look.

"Did Frey cut off your head?" I asked. "Is that why you're mad at me?"

Mimir huffed. "I'm not mad. You'll know when I'm mad."

I wondered what that meant. Maybe he would gurgle more threateningly.

"Your dad was part of the reason I lost my head, though," said Mimir. "See, as part of the truce to end the war, the two godly tribes exchanged hostages. Your father, Frey, and *his* father, Njord, came to live in Asgard. The god Honir and I—we were sent to live in Vanaheim."

"I'm guessing that didn't go well."

More water spouted from Mimir's ears. "Your father made me look bad! He was this great general among the Vanir—all golden and shiny and handsome. He and Njord got all kinds of respect in Asgard. As for me and Honir—the Vanir weren't so impressed."

"No kidding."

"Well, Honir was never very, how you say, charismatic. The Vanir would ask his opinions on important business. He'd mumble, 'Yeah, whatever. It's all good.' Me, I tried to pull my weight. I told the Vanir they should be getting into casinos."

"Casinos."

"Yeah, busloads of retirees coming to Vanaheim. Easy money. And the Vanir had all these dragons. I told them, racetracks. In the sky. With dragons. They'd make a killing."

I looked at Blitz and Hearth. They seemed resigned, like they'd heard this story many times before.

"So anyway," said Mimir, "the Vanir didn't like my worthy counsel. They felt cheated in the hostage swap. As a protest, they cut off my head and sent it to Odin."

"Shocking. When they could've had casinos."

Sam coughed loudly. "Of course, great Mimir, both Aesir and Vanir honor you now. Magnus didn't mean to insult you. He is not so stupid."

She glared at me like, *You are so stupid.*

Around Mimir's head, the water bubbled faster. It trickled from his pores and streamed from his eyes. "Forget about it, son of Frey. I don't hold a grudge. Besides, when Odin received my severed head, he didn't take revenge. See, the All-Father was smart. He knew the Vanir and Aesir had to unite against our common enemy, the Triads."

"Uh..." Blitz adjusted his hat. "I think you mean the giants, boss."

"Right. Those guys. So Odin carried me to a hidden cave in Jotunheim where this magical spring feeds the roots of Yggdrasil. He placed my head in the well. The water brought me back to life, and I soaked in all the knowledge of the World Tree. My wisdom increased a thousandfold."

"But...you're still a severed head."

Mimir made a sideways nod. "It's not so bad. I operate across the Nine Worlds—loans, protection, pachinko machines—"

"Pachinko."

“Pachinko is huge. Plus I’m always working to delay Ragnarok. Ragnarok would be bad for business.”

“Right.” I decided to sit down, because it seemed like this could take a while. Once I did it, Sam and Hearth followed my example. Chickens.

“Also,” Mimir said, “Odin visits me for advice from time to time. I’m his consigliere. I guard the well of knowledge. Sometimes I let travelers drink from its waters, though that kind of intel never comes without a price.”

The word *price* settled over the dock like a heavy blanket. Blitzen sat so still I was afraid he’d turned to stone. Hearthstone studied the grain of the planks. I began to understand how my friends had gotten involved with Mimir. They’d drunk from his waters (*gross*), and paid the price by watching me for the past two years. I wondered if what they’d learned had been worth it.

“So, Great and Well-Connected Mimir,” I said, “what do you want with me?”

Mimir spit out a minnow. “I don’t have to tell you, boyo. You already know.”

I wanted to disagree, but the longer I listened to Mimir, the more I felt like I was breathing pure oxygen. I don’t know why. The Capo wasn’t exactly inspiring. Yet being around him, my mind seemed to function better, weaving together bits and pieces of weirdness I’d experienced over the last few days into one strangely cohesive picture.

An illustration from my old children’s book of Norse myths came back to me—a tale so terrifying, even in its watered-down kiddie version, that I had buried it in my memory for years.

“The Wolf,” I said. “Surf wants to free Fenris Wolf.”

I was hoping somebody would contradict me. Hearth lowered his head. Sam closed her eyes like she was praying.

“Fenris,” said Blitzen. “There’s a name I was hoping never to hear again.”

Mimir kept crying ice water. His lips curled in a faint smile. “There you go, son of Frey. Now tell me: What do you know about Fenris Wolf?”

I buttoned my hunting jacket. The wind off the river seemed cold even to me. “Correct me if I’m wrong. I’d *love* to be wrong. Ages ago, Loki had an affair with a giantess. They had three monstrous kids.”

“I was *not* one of them,” Sam muttered. “I’ve heard all the jokes.”

Hearthstone winced, like he'd been wondering about that.

"One," I said, "was a huge snake."

"Jormungand," Sam said. "The World Serpent, which Odin threw into the sea."

"The second was Hel," I continued. "She became, like, the goddess of the dishonorable dead."

"And the third," Blitzen said, "was Fenris Wolf."

His tone was bitter, full of pain.

"Blitz," I said, "you sound like you know him."

"Every dwarf knows of Fenris. That was the first time the Aesir came to us for help. Fenris grew so savage he would've devoured the gods. They tried to tie him up, but he broke every chain."

"I remember," I said. "Finally the dwarves made a rope strong enough to hold him."

"Ever since," Blitzen said, "the children of Fenris have been enemies of the dwarves." He looked up, his dark shades reflecting my face. "You're not the only one who's lost family to wolves, kid."

I had a strange urge to hug him. Suddenly I didn't feel so bad about all the time he'd spent watching me. We were brothers in something more than homelessness. Still...I resisted the impulse. Whenever I'm tempted to hug a dwarf, that's usually a sign I need to move along.

"On Ragnarok," I said, "the Day of Doom, one of the first things that's supposed to happen is Fenris gets freed."

Sam nodded. "The old stories don't say how that happens—"

"But one way," Blitz said, "would be to cut him loose. The rope Gleipnir is unbreakable, but..."

*Frey's sword*, Hearth signed, *is the sharpest blade in the Nine Worlds.*

"Surf wants to free the Wolf with my father's sword." I looked at Mimir. "How are we doing so far?"

"Not bad," the head burbled. "Which brings us to your task."

"Stop Surf," I said. "Find the sword before he does...assuming he hasn't got it already."

"He doesn't," Mimir said. "Believe me, an event like that would make the Nine Worlds tremble. I'd taste fear in the waters of Yggdrasil."

"Yuck," I said.

"You have no idea," said Mimir. "But you must hurry."

"The Norns' prophecy. Nine days hence, blah, blah, blah."

Water bubbled out of Mimir's ears. "I'm pretty sure they didn't say *blah, blah, blah*. However, you're correct. The island where the gods imprisoned Fenris is only accessible on the first full moon of each year. That's now seven days hence."

"Who makes up these rules?" I asked.

"I made up that rule," Mimir said. "So shut up. Find the sword. Reach the island before Surt does."

Sam raised her hand. "Um, Lord Mimir, I understand finding the sword. But why take it to the island? Isn't that where Surt *wants* the sword?"

"See, Miss al-Abbas...this is why I'm the boss and you're not. Yeah, bringing the sword to the island is dangerous. Yeah, Surt could use it to free the Wolf. But Surt is gonna find a way to free Fenris with or without it. I did mention I can see the future, right? The only person who might be able to stop Surt is Magnus Chase—assuming he can find the sword and learn to wield it properly."

I'd shut up for almost a whole minute, so I figured I could raise my hand. "Lord Mister Bubbles—"

"Mimir."

"If this sword is such a big deal, why did everybody let it sit on the bottom of the Charles River for a thousand years?"

Mimir sighed foam. "My regular minions never ask so many questions."

Blitz coughed. "Actually, we do, boss. You just ignore us."

"To answer your question, Magnus Chase, the sword can only be found by a descendant of Frey upon reaching the age of maturity. Others have tried, failed, and died. Right now, you're the only living descendant of Frey."

"The only one...in the world?"

"In the *Nine Worlds*. Frey doesn't get out much anymore. Your mother —she must've been really something to attract his attention. Anyway, a lot of people in the Nine Worlds—gods, giants, bookies, you name it—have been waiting for you to turn sixteen. Some wanted you killed so you couldn't find the sword. Some wanted you to succeed."

Hot pins pressed against the base of my neck. The idea of a bunch of gods peering through their Asgardian telescopes, watching me grow up, creeped me out. My mom must have known all along. She'd done her best to keep me safe, to teach me survival skills. The night the wolves attacked our apartment, she'd given her life to save me.

I met the Capo's watery eyes. "And you?" I asked. "What do you want?"

"You're a risky bet, Magnus. A lot of possible fates intersect in your life. You could deal the forces of evil a great setback and delay Ragnarok for generations. Or, if you fail, you could hasten the Day of Doom."

I tried to swallow. "Hasten it, like, by how much?"

"How does next week work for you?"

"Oh."

"I decided to take the bet," Mimir said. "After the children of Fenris killed your mother, I sent Blitz and Hearth to guard you. You probably don't realize how many times they've saved your life."

Hearth held up seven fingers.

I shuddered, but mostly from the mention of Fenris's two children, the wolves with blue eyes....

"To succeed," said Mimir, "you're gonna need this team. Hearthstone here—he's dedicated his life to rune magic. Without him, you'll fail. You'll also need an able dwarf like Blitzen who understands dwarven crafting. You might need to strengthen the Wolf's bindings, or even replace them."

Blitz shifted. "Uh, boss...my crafting skills are, well, you know—"

"Don't give me that," said Mimir. "No dwarf has a stouter heart. No dwarf has traveled farther in the Nine Worlds or has more of a desire to keep Fenris chained. Also, you're in my service. You'll do what I say."

"Ah." Blitzen nodded. "When you put it that way..."

"What about me, Lord Mimir?" asked Sam. "What's my part in your plan?"

Mimir frowned. Around his beard, the water bubbled a darker shade of green. "You weren't part of the plan at all. There's a cloud around your fate, Miss al-Abbas. Taking Magnus to Valhalla—I didn't see that coming. It wasn't supposed to happen."

Sam looked away, her lips pressed tight with anger.

"Sam's got a part to play," I said. "I'm sure of it."

"Do not patronize me, Magnus. I chose you because—" She stopped herself. "It was supposed to happen."

I remembered what she'd said in the feast hall: *I was told...I was promised.* By whom? I decided not to ask that in front of the Capo.

Mimir studied her. "I hope you're right, Miss al-Abbas. When Magnus first took the sword from the river, he couldn't control it very well. Maybe

now that he's an einherji, he'll have the strength, in which case you've saved the day. Or maybe you've completely messed up his destiny."

"We're going to succeed," I insisted. "Just two questions: Where is the sword, and where is the island?"

Mimir nodded, which made him look like an oversize fishing bobber. "Well, that's the trick, isn't it? To find that kinda information, I'd have to tear the veils between the worlds, grease a lot of palms, see into the realms of the other gods."

"Couldn't we just drink your magic well water?"

"You could," he agreed. "But it would cost you. Are you and Samirah al-Abbas ready to be bound to my service?"

Hearth's face froze in apprehension. From the tension in Blitz's shoulders, I guessed he was trying very hard not to leap to his feet and scream, *Don't do it!*

"You couldn't make an exception?" I asked the Capo. "Seeing as how you *want* this job done?"

"No can do, boyo. I'm not being greedy. It's just, well, you get what you pay for. Something comes cheap, it ain't worth much. That's true for knowledge especially. You can pay for a shortcut, get the information right now, or you'll have to find it on your own, the hard way."

Sam crossed her arms. "Apologies, Lord Mimir. I may be kicked out of the Valkyries, but I still consider myself bound to Odin's service. I can't take on another master. Magnus can make his own choice, but—"

"We'll figure it out on our own," I agreed.

Mimir made a low sloshing sound. He looked almost impressed. "Interesting choice. Good luck, then. If you succeed, you'll have a house account at all my pachinko parlors. If you fail...I'll see you next week for Doomsday."

The god's head swirled and disappeared into the icy water of the lagoon.

"He flushed himself," I said.

Hearth looked even paler than usual. *What now?*

My stomach rumbled. I hadn't eaten anything since last night, and apparently my system had gotten spoiled after a couple of all-you-can-eat Viking buffets.

"Now," I said, "I'm thinking lunch."



## We Are Falafel-Jacked by an Eagle

WE DIDN'T TALK MUCH as we headed back through the park. The air smelled of incoming snow. The wind picked up and howled like wolves, or maybe I just had wolves on the brain.

Blitz limped along, zigzagging from shadow to shadow as best he could. Hearth's brightly striped scarf didn't match his grim expression. I wanted to ask him more about rune magic now that I knew he was the best (and only) mortal practitioner. Maybe there was a rune that could make wolves explode, preferably from a safe distance. But Hearth kept his hands shoved in his pockets—the sign language equivalent of *I don't want to talk*.

We were passing my old sleeping spot under the footbridge when Sam grumbled, "Mimir. I should've known he was involved."

I glanced over. "A few minutes ago, you were all, *Lord Mimir, you honor us; we're not worthy.*"

"Of course I showed respect when he was right in front of me! He's one of the oldest gods. But he's unpredictable. It's never been clear whose side he's on."

Blitzen jumped to the shade of a willow tree, alarming several ducks. "The Capo is on the side of everybody in the world who doesn't want to die. Isn't that enough?"

Sam laughed. “I suppose you two work for him of your own free will? You didn’t drink from his well and pay the price?”

Neither Blitz nor Hearth responded.

“That’s what I thought,” Sam said. “I’m not part of Mimir’s plan because I would never blindly go along with it and drink his magical knowledge Kool-Aid.”

“It doesn’t taste like Kool-Aid,” Blitz objected. “It’s more like root beer with a hint of clove.”

Sam turned to me. “I’m telling you, this doesn’t add up. Finding the Sword of Summer—I get that. But taking it to the very place where Surt wants to use it? Unwise.”

“Yeah, but if *I* have the sword—”

“Magnus, the sword is *destined* to fall into Surt’s hands sooner or later. At Ragnarok, your father will die because he gave his sword away. Surt will kill him with it. That’s what most of the stories say, anyway.”

I got claustrophobic just thinking about it. How could anybody, even a god, avoid going crazy if he knew centuries in advance exactly how he was going to die?

“Why does Surt hate Frey so much?” I asked. “Couldn’t he pick on a big strong war god?”

Blitzen frowned. “Kid, Surt wants death and destruction. He wants fire to run rampant across the Nine Worlds. A war god can’t stop that. Frey can. He’s the god of the growing season—the god of health and new life. He keeps the extremes in check, both fire and ice. There’s nothing Surt hates worse than being restrained. Frey is his natural enemy.”

*And by extension, I thought, Surt hates me.*

“If Frey knew what his fate would be,” I said, “why did he give up his blade in the first place?”

Blitz grunted. “Love. Why else?”

“Love?”

“Ugh,” Sam said. “I *hate* that story. Where are you taking us for lunch, Magnus?”

Part of me wanted to hear the story. Part of me remembered my conversation with Loki: *Will you search for your heart’s desire, knowing it may doom you as it doomed your father?*

A lot of Norse stories seemed to have the same message: Knowing things wasn’t always worth the price. Unfortunately for me, I’d always been

the curious type.

“It’s...uh, just up ahead,” I said. “Come on.”

The food court at the Transportation Building wasn’t Valhalla, but if you were homeless in Boston, it was pretty close. The indoor atrium was warm, open to the public, and never crowded. It was only halfheartedly patrolled by private security. As long as you had a drink cup or a plate of half-eaten food, you could sit at the tables for a long time before anybody made you move.

On the way in, Blitzen and Hearthstone started toward the garbage cans to check for lunch leavings, but I stopped them.

“Guys, no,” I said. “We’re eating actual meals today. My treat.”

Hearth raised an eyebrow. He signed, *You have money?*

“He’s got that friend here,” Blitzen recalled. “The falafel guy.”

Sam froze in her tracks. “What?”

She looked around as if just realizing where we were.

“It’s cool,” I promised. “I know a guy at Fadlan’s Falafel. You’ll thank me for it. Stuff is amazing—”

“No—I—oh, gods—” She hastily put her scarf over her hair. “Maybe I’ll wait outside—I can’t—”

“Nonsense.” Blitz hooked his arm through hers. “They might serve more food if we’ve got a pretty woman with us!”

Sam clearly wanted to bolt, but she allowed Hearth and Blitz to steer her into the food court. I guess I should’ve paid more attention to how uncomfortable she was acting, but once you put me within a hundred feet of Fadlan’s Falafel, I get tunnel vision.

Over the past two years, I’d struck up a friendship with the manager, Abdel. I think he saw me as his community service project. The shop always had surplus food—slightly out-of-date pita bread, day-old shawarma, kibbeh that had been sitting under the heat lamps a little too long. Abdel couldn’t legally sell the stuff, but it still tasted perfectly fine. Instead of throwing it out, Abdel gave it to me. Whenever I came around, I could count on a falafel flatbread sandwich or something just as tasty. In return, I made sure the other homeless folks in the atrium stayed polite and cleaned up after themselves so Abdel’s paying customers weren’t scared away.

In Boston, you couldn’t walk a block without stumbling into some icon of liberty—the Freedom Trail, the Old North Church, the Bunker Hill

Monument, whatever—but to me, liberty tasted like Fadlan’s Falafel. That stuff had kept me alive and independent ever since my mom died.

I didn’t want to overwhelm Abdel with too many people, so I sent Blitz and Hearth to grab a table while I escorted Sam to get the food. The whole way, she dragged her feet, turning aside, fiddling with her headscarf as if she wanted to disappear inside it.

“What’s the matter with you?” I asked.

“Maybe he’s not there,” she muttered. “Maybe you can say I’m your tutor.”

I didn’t know what she was talking about. I bellied up to the counter while Sam hung back, doing her best to hide behind a potted ficus tree.

“Is Abdel here?” I asked the guy at the register.

He started to say something, but then Abdel’s son Amir came out from the back, grinning and wiping his hands on his apron. “Jimmy, how’s it going?”

I relaxed. If Abdel wasn’t around, Amir was the next best thing. He was eighteen or nineteen, trim and good-looking, with slick dark hair, an Arabic tattoo on his biceps, and a smile so brilliant, it could’ve sold truckloads of teeth whitener. Like everybody at Fadlan’s Falafel, he knew me as “Jimmy.”

“Yeah, I’m good,” I said. “How’s your pop?”

“He’s at the Somerville location today. Can I get you some food?”

“Man, you’re the best.”

Amir laughed. “No biggie.” He glanced over my shoulder and did a double take. “And there’s Samirah! What are you doing here?”

She shuffled forward. “Hi, Amir. I am...tutoring Ma—Jimmy. I am tutoring Jimmy.”

“Oh, yeah?” Amir leaned on the counter, which made his arm muscles flex. The dude worked full-time at his dad’s various shops, yet he somehow managed to avoid getting even a speck of grease on his white T-shirt.

“Don’t you have school?”

“Um, yes, but I get credit for tutoring off campus. Jimmy and...his classmates.” She pointed toward Blitz and Hearth, who were having a rapid-fire argument in sign language, tracing circles in the air. “Geometry,” Samirah said. “They’re hopeless with geometry.”

“Hopeless,” I agreed. “But food helps us study.”

Amir's eyes crinkled. "I've got you covered. Glad to see you're okay, Jimmy. That bridge accident the other day—the paper had this picture of a kid who died? Looked a lot like you. Different name, but we were worried."

I'd been so focused on falafel that I'd forgotten to think about them making that connection. "Ah, yeah, I saw that. I'm good. Just studying geometry. With my tutor."

"Okay!" Amir smiled at Sam. The awkwardness was so thick you could've cut it with a broadsword. "Well, Samirah, say hi to Jid and Bibi for me. You guys go ahead and sit. I'll bring out some food in a sec."

Sam muttered something that might have been *Thanks a lot* or *Kill me now*. Then we joined Blitz and Hearth at the table.

"What was that about?" I asked her. "How do you know Amir?"

She pulled her scarf a little lower over her forehead. "Don't sit too close to me. Try to look like we're talking about geometry."

"Triangles," I said. "Quadrilaterals. Also, why are you embarrassed? Amir is awesome. If you know the Fadlan family, you're like a rock star to me."

"He's my cousin," she blurted. "Second cousin, twice removed. Or something."

I looked at Hearth. He was scowling at the floor. Blitz had taken off his ski mask and glasses, I guess because the interior light didn't bother him as much, and was now sullenly spinning a plastic fork on the table. Apparently I'd missed a good argument between him and Hearth.

"Okay," I said. "But why so nervous?"

"Can you drop it?" she said.

I raised my hands. "Fine. Let's all start over. Hi, everybody. I'm Magnus, and I'm an einherji. If we're not going to study geometry, could we talk about how we're going to find the Sword of Summer?"

Nobody answered.

A pigeon waddled past, pecking at crumbs.

I glanced back at the falafel shop. For some reason, Amir had rolled down the steel curtain. I'd never seen him close the shop during lunch hour. I wondered if Sam had somehow offended him and he'd cut off my falafel allowance.

If so, I was going to go berserker.

"What happened to our food?" I wondered.

At my feet, a small voice croaked, “I can help with both those questions.”

I looked down. My week had been so wack I didn’t even flinch when I realized who had spoken.

“Guys,” I said, “this pigeon wants to help.”

The pigeon fluttered onto our table. Hearth nearly fell out of his chair. Blitz snatched up a fork.

“Service here can be a little slow,” said the pigeon. “But I can speed up your order. I can also tell you where to find the sword.”

Sam reached for her ax. “That’s not a pigeon.”

The bird regarded her with a beady orange eye. “Maybe not. But if you kill me, you’ll never get your lunch. You’ll also never find the sword or see your intended again.”

Samirah’s eyes looked like they were going to shoot across the atrium.

“What is he talking about?” I said. “Intended *what*? ”

The bird cooed. “If you ever want Fadlan’s Falafel to open again—”

“Okay, that’s a declaration of war.” I considered grabbing for the bird, but even with my einherji reflexes, I doubted I could catch it. “What did you do? What’s happened to Amir?”

“Nothing yet!” said the pigeon. “I’ll bring you your lunch. All I want is first pick of the food.”

“Uh-huh,” I said. “And assuming I believe you, what would you want in exchange for information about the sword?”

“A favor. It’s negotiable. Now, does that falafel shop stay closed forever, or do we have a deal?”

Blitzen shook his head. “Don’t do it, Magnus.”

Hearth signed, *Pigeons cannot be trusted.*

Sam met my eyes. Her expression was pleading—almost frantic. Either she liked falafel even more than I did, or she was worried about something else.

“Fine,” I said. “Bring us our lunch.”

Immediately the shop’s steel curtain rolled up. The cashier stood like a statue, the phone to his ear. Then he unfroze, glanced over his shoulder, and shouted an order to the cook as if nothing had happened. The pigeon took off and sped toward the shop, disappearing behind the counter. The cashier didn’t seem to notice.

A moment later, a much larger bird shot out of the kitchen—a bald eagle with a tray in his claws. He landed in the middle of our table.

“You’re an eagle now?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said in the same croaky voice. “I like to mix it up. Here’s your food.”

It was everything I could’ve asked for: steaming squares of spiced ground beef kibbeh; a stack of lamb kebabs with mint yogurt dip; four fresh slabs of pita bread filled with deep-fried nuggets of chickpea goodness, drizzled in tahini sauce and garnished with pickle wedges.

“Oh, Helheim yes.” I reached for the tray, but the eagle pecked at my hand.

“Now, now,” he chided. “I get first pick.”

Ever seen an eagle eat falafel?

That horrifying image now haunts my nightmares.

Faster than I could blink, the eagle struck, vacuuming up everything but a single wedge of pickle.

“Hey!” I yelled.

Sam rose, hefting her ax. “He’s a giant. He’s got to be!”

“We had a deal.” The eagle belched. “Now about the sword—”

I let loose a guttural roar—the cry of a man who has been deprived of his rightful kibbeh. I drew my sword and smacked the eagle with the flat of the blade.

It wasn’t the most rational move, but I was hungry. I was angry. I hated being taken advantage of, and I didn’t particularly like bald eagles.

The blade hit the bird’s back and stuck there like superglue. I tried to pull it away, but it wouldn’t move. My hands were grafted to the sword grip.

“Okay, then,” the eagle squawked, “we can play it that way.”

He took off through the food court at sixty miles an hour, dragging me along behind him.



## An Apple a Day Will Get You Killed

ADD TO MY LIST of Least Favorite Activities: eagle surfing.

The stupid bird shouldn't have been able to take off with a more-or-less-full-grown Magnus in tow. Yet he did.

Behind me, Blitz and Sam yelled helpful stuff like “Hey! Stop!” as the eagle dragged me through tables, chairs, and potted plants, then blasted through the double glass doors and soared over Charles Street.

A guy having lunch in the tenth-floor condo across the street spewed Cheetos when I shot past. I left a nice footprint on his window.

“Let me go!” I yelled at the eagle.

The bird cackled as he pulled me along a rooftop. “You sure about that? Heads up!”

I twisted, barely avoiding a face-first encounter with an industrial AC unit. I plowed through a brick chimney, using my chest as a battering ram. Then the eagle plummeted down the other side of the building.

“So!” the eagle said. “You ready to negotiate that favor?”

“With a mutant pigeon who steals falafel?” I yelled. “No thanks!”

“Suit yourself.” The eagle veered, slamming me into a fire escape. I felt my ribs crack, like vials of acid breaking inside my chest. My empty stomach tried unsuccessfully to hurl.

We climbed above one of the churches on Boylston and circled the steeple. I had an addled thought about Paul Revere and the whole *One if by land, two if by sea* thing.

*And if you see a dude being dragged by a giant eagle, uh, I don't even know how many lights that is.*

I tried to heal my ribs through willpower, but I couldn't concentrate. The pain was too intense. I kept running into walls and kicking out windows.

"All I want," the eagle said, "is a favor for a favor. I'll tell you how to get the sword, but you have to get me something while you're at it. Nothing much. Just an apple. One apple."

"What's the catch?"

"The catch is that if you don't agree...oh, look! Pigeon spikes!"

Ahead of us, the edge of a hotel roof bristled with steel like a miniature line of World War I barbed wire. The spikes were there to discourage roosting birds, but they'd also do a great job shredding my soft underbelly.

Fear got the best of me. I don't like pointy objects. My gut was still sensitive from my recent death by molten asphalt.

"Fine!" I yelled. "No spikes!"

"Say: *By my troth, I agree to your terms.*"

"I don't even know what that means!"

"Say it!"

"By my troth, I agree to your terms! Yes, apples! No, spikes!"

The eagle climbed, narrowly clearing the roof. The tips of my shoes twanged against the barbs. We circled Copley Square and landed on the roof of the Boston Public Library.

The sword came free of the eagle's back. My hands unglued themselves, which was great, except that I now had nothing to hold on to. The red curved clay tiles were almost impossible to stand on. The roof slanted precariously. Eighty feet below me stretched a wide expanse of pavement-flavored death.

I crouched to avoid falling. Carefully, I sheathed my sword, which melted back into a length of chain.

"Ow," I said.

My ribs ached. My arms had been pulled half out of their sockets. My chest felt like it had been permanently tattooed with a brick wall design.

To my left, the eagle perched on a lightning-rod spire, lording over the decorative bronze griffins around the base.

I'd never thought of eagles as having expressions, but this one definitely looked smug.

"I'm glad you saw reason!" he said. "Though, honestly, I enjoyed our little flight through the city. It's good to speak with you alone."

"I'm blushing," I grumbled. "Oh, no, wait. That's the blood all over my face."

"Here's the information you need," the eagle continued. "When your sword fell in the river, the current carried it downstream. It was claimed by the goddess Ran. Lots of valuable things end up in her net."

"Ran?"

The eagle clicked his beak. "Sea goddess. Has a net. Try to keep up."

"Where do I find her? And please don't say 'the sea.'"

"She could be anywhere, so you'll have to get her attention. The way to do that: I know this guy, Harald. He's got a boat at the Fish Pier, does deep-sea excursions. Tell him Big Boy sent you."

"Big Boy."

"One of my many names. Harald will know what you mean. Convince him to take you fishing in Massachusetts Bay. If you cause enough of a ruckus out there, you'll attract Ran's attention. Then you can negotiate. Ask her for the sword and one of Idun's apples."

"Eden."

"Are you just going to repeat every name I give you? It's I-D-U-N. She distributes the apples of immortality that keep the gods young and spry. Ran is sure to have one lying around, because seriously, once you see her, you'll be able to tell she's not good about remembering to eat her apples. When you have the apple, bring it back here. Give it to me, and I'll release you from your vow."

"Two questions. Are you insane?"

"No."

"Second question: How is fishing in the bay going to create a ruckus that attracts a sea goddess?"

"That depends on what you fish for. Tell Harald you need the special bait. He'll understand. If he protests, tell him Big Boy insists."

"I have no idea what that means," I confessed. "Assuming I meet Ran, how am I supposed to bargain with her?"

“That’s three questions. Also, that’s your problem.”

“Last question.”

“This is four now.”

“What’s to keep me from getting the sword and not bringing you an apple?”

“Well, you swore by your troth,” said the eagle. “Your troth is your word, your faith, your honor, your soul. It’s a binding oath, especially for an einherji. Unless you want to spontaneously combust and find yourself trapped forever in the icy darkness of Helheim...”

I chewed my lip. “I guess I’ll keep my promise.”

“Excellent!” The eagle flapped his wings. “Here come your friends, which is my cue to leave. I’ll see you when you have my fresh produce!”

The eagle soared away and disappeared behind the glass walls of the Hancock Tower, leaving me to find my own way off the roof.

Down in Copley Square, Blitzen, Hearthstone, and Sam were just running onto the frozen lawn. Sam saw me first. She stopped in her tracks and pointed.

I waved.

I couldn’t see her expression, but she spread her arms like, *What the heck are you doing up there?*

With some difficulty, I got to my feet. Thanks to my ValhallaCare health plan, my injuries were already starting to mend, but I still felt sore and stiff. I picked my way to the edge of the roof and peered over. Magnus 1.0 never would’ve considered it, but now I plotted a series of ten-foot jumps—to that window ledge, that flagpole, the top of that light fixture, then the front steps—and I thought, *Yeah, no problem.*

In a matter of seconds, I’d safely reached the ground. My friends met me at the sidewalk.

“What was *that* about?” Blitzen demanded. “Was he a giant?”

“Dunno,” I said. “His name is Big Boy, and he likes apples.”

I told them the story.

Hearthstone smacked his forehead. He signed: *You swore by your troth?*

“Well, it was either that or get shredded by pigeon spikes, so yeah.”

Sam stared at the sky, maybe hoping to see an eagle she could hit with her ax. “This will end badly. Deals with giants always do.”

“At least Magnus found out where the sword is,” Blitzen said. “Besides, Ran’s a goddess. She’ll be on our side, right?”

Sam snorted. “I guess you haven’t heard the stories about her that *I* have. But at this point, we don’t have much choice. Let’s find Harald.”



## Go Smelly or Go Home

I'D NEVER BEEN SCARED of boats until I saw Harald's.

Painted on the prow was HARALD'S DEEP-SEA EXCURSIONS AND DEATH WISHES, which seemed like a lot of verbiage for a twenty-foot-long dinghy. The deck was a mess of ropes, buckets, and tackle boxes. Nets and buoys festooned the sides like Christmas decorations. The hull had once been green but had faded to the color of well-chewed spearmint gum.

Nearby on the dock sat Harald himself, in splattered yellow coveralls and a T-shirt so grungy, my donation box Wiggles shirt would've been an upgrade. He was a sumo-size guy with arms as thick as the rotating meat spits back at Fadlan's Falafel. (Yes, I was still thinking about food.)

The weirdest thing about him was his hair. His shaggy locks, his beard, even his fuzzy forearms glistened whitish blue, as if he'd been caught outside overnight and glazed with frost.

As we approached, he looked up from the rope he was coiling. "Well, now. A dwarf, an elf, and two humans walk onto my pier... Sounds like the beginning of a joke."

"I hope not," I said. "We want to rent your boat for a fishing expedition. We'll need the special bait."

Harald snorted. "You four on one of *my* expeditions? I don't think so." "Big Boy sent us."

Harald furrowed his brow, causing light snow to fall across his cheeks.  
“Big Boy, eh? What does he want with the likes of you?”

Sam stepped forward. “None of your concern.” From her coat pocket she pulled a large coin and tossed it to Harald. “One red gold now; five more when we finish. Will you rent us the boat or not?”

I leaned toward her. “What is red gold?”

“The currency of Asgard and Valhalla,” she said. “Widely accepted in the other realms.”

Harald sniffed the coin. Its gold surface glowed so warmly it seemed to be on fire. “You have giantish blood, girl? I can see it in your eyes.”

“That’s also none of your concern.”

“Humph. The payment is sufficient, but my boat is small. Two passengers maximum. I’ll take you and the human boy, but the dwarf and the elf—forget it.”

Blitzen cracked his knuckles inside his leather gloves. “Look here, Frosty—”

“HUR! Never call a frost giant *Frosty*. We hate that. Besides, you look half petrified already, dwarf. I don’t need another anchor. As for elves, they are creatures of air and light. They’re useless aboard a ship. Two passengers only. That’s the deal. Take it or leave it.”

I glanced at my friends. “Guys, sidebar please.”

I led them down the dock, out of earshot from Harald. “That dude is a frost giant?”

Hearthstone signed: *Icy hair. Ugly. Big. Yes.*

“But...I mean, he’s large, but he’s not *giant*.”

Sam’s expression made me suspect she was not the most patient geometry tutor. “Magnus, giants aren’t necessarily enormous. Some are. Some can grow to enormous size if they feel like it. But they’re even more varied than humans. Many look like regular people. Some can change shape into eagles or pigeons or almost anything.”

“But what’s a frost giant doing on the docks in Boston? Can we trust him?”

“First answer,” Blitzen said, “frost giants are all over the place, especially in the north of Midgard. As for trusting him—absolutely not. He might take you two straight to Jotunheim and throw you in a dungeon, or he might use you for bait. You have to insist that Hearth and I go with you.”

Hearth tapped Blitz’s shoulder.

*Giant is right, he signed. I told you—too much daylight. You are turning to stone. Too stubborn to admit.*

“Nah, I’m fine.”

Hearth looked around the dock. He spotted a metal pail, picked it up, and slammed it over Blitz’s head. Blitz didn’t react, but the pail crumpled into the shape of his skull.

“Okay,” Blitz admitted, “maybe I’m petrifying a little, but—”

“Get out of the light for a while,” I told him. “We’ll be fine. Hearth, can you find him a nice underground lair or something?”

Hearth nodded. *We will try to find out more about Fenris and his chains. Meet you tonight. Back at library?*

“Sounds good,” I said. “Sam, let’s go fishing.”

We returned to Harald, who was fashioning his rope into a lovely noose.

“Okay,” I told him, “two passengers. We need to fish as far out in Massachusetts Bay as possible, and we need the special bait.”

Harald gave me a twisted grin. His teeth might have been cut from the same fuzzy brown cord he was coiling. “By all means, little human.” He pointed to a sliding door on the side of the warehouse. “Pick your own bait...if you can carry it.”

When Sam and I opened the door, I almost passed out from the stench.

Sam gagged. “Odin’s Eye, I have smelled less fragrant battlefields.”

Inside the storage room, hanging from meat hooks, was an impressive collection of rotting carcasses. The smallest was a five-foot-long shrimp. The largest was a severed bull’s head the size of a Fiat.

I covered my nose with my jacket sleeve. That didn’t help. I felt like somebody had filled a grenade with rotten egg, rusty metal, and raw onion, then tossed it into my sinus cavity.

“It hurts to breathe,” I said. “Which of these tasty morsels do you think is the special bait?”

Sam pointed at the bull’s head. “Go big or go home?”

“She said to the homeless kid.” I forced myself to study the bull’s head —its curved black horns, its lolling pink tongue like a hairy air mattress, its white steaming fur, and the glistening slime craters of its nostrils. “How is it possible that a bull grew that large?”

“It’s probably from Jotunheim,” Sam said. “Their cattle get pretty big.”

“You don’t say. Any idea what we’re supposed to be fishing for?”

“There are lots of sea monsters in the deep. As long as it’s not...” A shadow crossed her face. “Never mind. Probably just a sea monster.”

“Just a sea monster,” I said. “That’s a relief.”

I was tempted to take the jumbo shrimp and get out of there, but I had a feeling we’d need bigger bait if we were going to cause a ruckus that would attract a sea goddess.

“The bull’s head it is,” I decided.

Sam hefted her ax. “I’m not sure it’ll even fit on Harald’s boat, but—”

She threw her ax at the meat hook chain, which broke with a snap. The bull’s head crashed to the floor like a large, disgusting piñata. The ax flew back to Sam’s hand.

Together we gripped the meat hook and dragged the bull’s head out of the storage locker. Even with help, I shouldn’t have been able to move it, but my einherji strength was up to the task.

*Die painfully. Go to Valhalla. Gain the ability to drag rancid, colossal severed heads across a dock. Hooray.*

When we got to the boat, I yanked the chain with all my strength. The bull’s head toppled off the pier and smashed onto the deck. The S.S. *Harald* almost capsized, but somehow it stayed afloat. The bull’s head took up the back half of the ship. Its tongue hung over the stern. Its left eye rolled up in its head so it looked seasick.

Harald rose from his bait bucket. If he was at all surprised or annoyed that I’d dropped a five-hundred-pound cow head on his boat, he didn’t show it.

“An ambitious choice of bait.” Harald gazed across the harbor. The sky was darkening. Light sleet needled the surface of the water. “Let’s get going, then. Lovely afternoon to fish.”



## My Years of Playing Bassmasters 2000 Really Pay Off

IT WAS A TERRIBLE AFTERNOON TO FISH.

The sea heaved and so did I, right over the side several times. The cold didn't bother me, but the sleet stung my face. The rocking of the deck made my legs feel like Slinkys. Harald the frost giant stood at the wheel, singing in a guttural language I assumed was Jotunese.

Sam didn't seem to mind the rough seas. She leaned against the bow rail and stared into the gray, her scarf rippling around her neck like gills.

"What's with the scarf anyway?" I asked. "Sometimes you cover your head. Sometimes you don't."

She laid her fingers protectively over the green silk. "It's a hijab. I wear it when I want to, or when I think I need to. Like when I take my grandmother to mosque on Friday, or—"

"Or when you see Amir?"

She muttered under her breath. "I almost thought you were going to let that go."

"The pigeon said Amir is your intended. Like...*engaged*? What are you, like, sixteen?"

"Magnus—"

“I’m just saying, if this is one of those forced arranged marriages, that’s messed up. You’re a Valkyrie. You should be able to—”

“Magnus, shut it. Please.”

The boat hit a swell, spraying us with saltwater buckshot.

Samirah gripped the rail. “My grandparents are old-fashioned. They were raised in Baghdad, but fled to the U.S. when Saddam Hussein was in power.”

“And...?”

“They’ve known the Fadlans since forever. They’re good people. Distant kin. Successful, kind—”

“I know. Abdel is awesome. Amir seems cool. But a forced marriage if you don’t love the guy—”

“Ugh! You don’t get it. I’ve been in love with Amir since I was twelve.”

The boat groaned as it dipped between the waves. Harald kept singing his Jotunese version of “Ninety-Nine Bottles of Beer.”

“Oh,” I said.

“Not that it’s any of your business,” Samirah said.

“Yeah. No.”

“But sometimes when a family tries to find a good match, they actually *care* what the girl thinks.”

“Okay.”

“I didn’t realize until I was older...After my mom died, my grandparents took me in but, well, my mom wasn’t married when she had me. That’s still a big deal for my grandparents’ generation.”

“Yeah.” I decided not to add: *Plus the fact that your dad was Loki, the father of evil.*

Sam seemed to read my thoughts. “She was a doctor, my mom. She found Loki in the emergency room. He was...I don’t know...he’d used up too much of his power trying to appear in Midgard in physical form. He got trapped somehow, divided between worlds. His manifestation in Boston was in agony, weak and helpless.”

“She cured him?”

Sam brushed a droplet of seawater from her wrist. “In a way. She was kind to him. She stayed by his side. Loki can be very charming when he wants to be.”

“I know.” I blinked. “I mean...from the stories. You’ve met him in person?”

She shot me a dark look. “I don’t approve of my father. He may be charismatic, but he’s also a liar, a thief, a murderer. He’s visited me several times. I refused to talk to him, which drives him nuts. He likes to be noticed. He’s not exactly low-key.”

“I get it,” I said. “Loki. Low-key.”

She rolled her eyes. “Anyway, my mom mostly raised me by herself. She was headstrong, unconventional. When she died...Well, in the local community, I was damaged goods, a bastard child. My grandparents were lucky, very lucky, to get the Fadlans’ blessing for me to marry Amir. I won’t really bring anything to the marriage. I’m not rich or respectable or—”

“Come on,” I said. “You’re smart. You’re tough. You’re an honest-to-Frigg Valkyrie. And I can’t believe I’m finding reasons to support your arranged marriage....”

Her dark hair whipped around her, collecting flecks of ice.

“The Valkyrie thing is a problem,” she said. “My family...well, we’re a little different. We have a long, long history with the Norse gods.”

“How?”

She waved away the question like, *Too much to explain.*

“Still,” she said, “if anyone found out about my other life...I don’t think Mr. Fadlan would be okay with his eldest son marrying a girl who moonlights as a soul collector for pagan gods.”

“Ah. When you put it that way...”

“I cover for my absences as best I can.”

“Math tutoring.”

“And some simple Valkyrie glamours. But a good Muslim girl is not supposed to hang out on her own with strange guys.”

“Strange guys. Thanks.”

I had a sudden image of Sam sitting in English class when her phone started to buzz. The screen flashed: ODIN CALLING. She dashed to the restroom, changed into her Super Valkyrie costume, and flew out the nearest window.

“When you got kicked out of Valhalla...uh, I mean, I’m sorry about that. But didn’t you think, *Hey, maybe this is a good thing. I can have a normal life now?*”

“No. That’s the problem. I want *both*. I want to marry Amir when the time comes. But also, all my life, I’ve wanted to fly.”

“Flying like *airplanes* or flying like *zooming around on a magic horse?*”

“Both. When I was six, I started drawing pictures of airplanes. I wanted to be a pilot. How many Arab American female pilots do you know?”

“You would be the first,” I admitted.

“I *like* that idea. Ask me any question about airplanes. I can answer it.”

“So when you became a Valkyrie—”

“It was a total rush. A dream come true, being able to take off at a moment’s notice. Besides, I felt like I was doing some good. I could find honorable, brave people who died protecting others, and I could bring them to Valhalla. You don’t know how much I miss that.”

I could hear the pain in her voice. *Honorable brave people...* She was including me in that group. After all the trouble she’d gotten into for my sake, I wanted to tell her that it would be all right. We would figure out a way so she could have both her lives.

But I couldn’t even promise we’d live through this boat trip.

From the wheelhouse, Harald bellowed, “Mortals, you should bait your hooks! We’re getting close to good fishing!”

Sam shook her head. “No. Go farther out!”

Harald scowled. “Not safe! Any farther—”

“You want your gold or not?”

Harald muttered something that was probably inappropriate in Jotunese. He gunned the motor.

I looked at Sam. “How do you know we need to go farther?”

“I can sense it,” she said. “One of the advantages of my father’s blood, I guess. I can usually tell where the biggest monsters are lurking.”

“Joy and happiness.”

I peered into the gloom. I thought about Ginnungagap, the primordial mist between ice and fire. We seemed to be sailing right into it. Any moment the sea might dissolve and we’d fall into oblivion. I hoped I was wrong. Sam’s grandparents would probably be ticked off if she didn’t get home in time for dinner.

The boat shuddered. The sea darkened.

“There,” Sam said. “Did you feel it? We’ve passed from Midgard into Jotunheim waters.”

I pointed off the port bow. A few hundred yards away, a granite spire jutted out of the fog. “But that’s Graves Light. We’re not too far from the

harbor."

Sam grabbed one of the giant's fishing poles, which looked more appropriate for heavyweight pole-vaulting. "The worlds overlap, Magnus, especially near Boston. Go get the bait."

Harald slowed the engines when he saw me coming aft.

"Too dangerous to fish here," he warned. "Besides, I doubt you'll be able to cast that bait."

"Shut up, Harald." I grabbed the chain and dragged the bull's head forward, almost knocking the captain overboard with one of its horns.

When I got back to Sam, we examined the meat hook, which was embedded pretty well in the bull's skull.

"That should work for a fishing hook," Sam decided. "Let's get this chain tied on."

We spent a few minutes attaching the chain to the fishing line—a thin braided steel cable that made the reel weigh about three hundred pounds.

Together, Sam and I rolled the bull's head off the front of the boat. It sank slowly into the icy froth, the bull's dead eye staring at me as it submerged, like, *Not cool, man!*

Harald lumbered over carrying a large chair. He sunk its four feet into anchor holes on the deck. Then he lashed the seat in place with steel cables.

"If I were you, human," he said, "I'd buckle up."

With its leather harnesses, the seat looked a little too much like an electric chair to me, but Sam held the fishing pole while I strapped myself in.

"So why am *I* in the chair?" I asked.

"Your promise," she reminded me. "You swore by your troth."

"Troth sucks." From the giant's supply kit, I pulled some leather gloves that were only four sizes too big and put them on.

Sam handed me the pole, and then found gloves for herself.

I had a disjointed memory from when I was ten years old, watching *Jaws* with my mom because she insisted. She warned me it was superscary, but the whole time I was either bored at the slow pace or laughing at the schlocky-looking rubber shark.

"Please let me catch a rubber shark," I muttered now.

Harald cut the engines. Suddenly it was freakishly quiet. The wind died. The sleet against the deck sounded like sand hitting glass. The waves calmed as if the sea was holding its breath.

Sam stood at the rail, feeding out cable as the bull's head sank into the depths. Finally the line went slack.

"Did we hit bottom?" I asked.

Sam bit her lip. "I don't know. I think—"

The line sprang taut with a sound like a hammer on a saw blade. Sam let go to avoid being catapulted into space. The pole was nearly ripped out of my hands, taking my fingers with it, but somehow I held on.

The chair groaned. The leather straps dug into my collarbones. The entire boat leaned forward into the waves with timbers creaking and rivets popping.

"Ymir's Blood!" Harald yelled. "We're breaking apart!"

"Give it more line!" Sam grabbed a bucket. She poured water on the cable, which steamed as it raced off the prow.

I gritted my teeth. My arm muscles felt like warm bread dough. Just when I was sure I couldn't hold on any longer, the pulling stopped. The line hummed with tension, laser-dotting on the gray water about a hundred yards starboard.

"What's going on?" I asked. "Is it resting?"

Harald cursed. "I don't like this. Sea monsters don't act this way. Even the biggest catches—"

"Reel it in," Sam said. "Now!"

I turned the handle. It was like arm-wrestling the Terminator. The rod bent. The cable creaked. Sam pulled the line, keeping it clear of the rail, but even with her help I could barely make any progress.

My shoulders went numb. My lower back spasmed. Despite the cold, I was soaked with sweat and shivering with exhaustion. I felt like I was reeling in a sunken battleship.

From time to time, Sam yelled encouraging things like, "No, you idiot! Pull!"

Finally, in front of the boat, the sea darkened in a fifty-foot-diameter oval. The waves sloshed and boiled.

Up in the wheelhouse, Harald must have had a better view of whatever was coming to the surface. He screamed in a very ungiantish voice, "Cut the line!"

"No," Sam said. "It's too late for that."

Harald snatched up a knife. He threw it at the cable, but Sam deflected the blade with her ax.

“Back off, giant!” she yelled.

“But you can’t bring that thing up!” Harald wailed. “It’s the—”

“Yes, I know!”

The rod began slipping from my hands. “Help!”

Sam lunged and grabbed the fishing pole. She wedged herself next to me in the chair to assist, but I was too tired and terrified to feel embarrassed.

“We may all die,” she muttered, “but this will *definitely* get Ran’s attention.”

“Why?” I asked. “What is that thing?”

Our catch broke the surface and opened its eyes.

“Meet my older brother,” Sam said, “the World Serpent.”



## Sam's Brother Wakes Up Kinda Cranky

WHEN I SAY the serpent opened his eyes, I mean he switched on green spotlights the size of trampolines. His irises glowed so intensely I was pretty sure everything I saw for the rest of my life would be tinted the color of lime Jell-O.

The good news: the rest of my life didn't look like it was going to be very long.

The monster's ridged forehead and tapered snout made him look more like an eel than a snake. His hide glistened in a camouflage patchwork of green, brown, and yellow. (Here I am calmly describing him. At the time the only thought in my mind was: YIKES! HUGE SNAKE!)

He opened his mouth and hissed—the stench of rancid bull's head and poison so strong my clothes smoked. He may not have used mouthwash, but obviously the World Serpent cared about flossing. His teeth gleamed in rows of perfect white triangles. His pink maw was big enough to swallow Harald's boat and a dozen of Harald's closest friends' boats.

My meat hook was embedded in the back of his mouth, right where the hangy-down uvula thing would be in a human mouth. The serpent didn't seem too happy about that.

He shook back and forth, raking the steel line across his teeth. My fishing pole whipped sideways. The boat seesawed port to starboard, planks

cracking and popping, but somehow we stayed afloat. My line didn't break.

"Sam?" I said in a small voice. "Why hasn't he killed us yet?"

She pressed so close to me I could feel her shivering. "I think he's studying us, maybe even trying to talk to us."

"What is he saying?"

Sam gulped. "My guess? *How dare you?*"

The serpent hissed, spitting globs of poison that sizzled against the deck.

Behind us, Harald whimpered, "Drop the pole, you fools! You'll get us all killed!"

I tried to meet the serpent's gaze. "Hey, Mr. Jormungand. Can I call you Mr. J? Look, sorry to bother you. Nothing personal. We're just using you to get somebody's attention."

Mr. J didn't like that. His head surged out of the water, towering above us, then crashed down again off the bow, triggering a forty-foot-tall ring of waves.

Sam and I were definitely sitting in the splash zone. I ate salt water for lunch. My lungs discovered they could not in fact breathe the stuff. My eyes got a thorough power washing. But, incredibly, the boat didn't capsize. When the rocking and sloshing subsided, I found myself still alive, still holding the fishing pole with my line still attached to the World Serpent's mouth. The monster stared at me like, *Why are you not dead?*

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the tsunami crash against the Graves, washing all the way up to the base of the lighthouse. I wondered if I'd just flooded Boston.

I remembered why Jormungand was called the World Serpent. Supposedly his body was so long it wrapped around the earth, stretching across the sea floor like a monstrous telecommunication cable. Most of the time he kept his tail in his mouth—Hey, I used a pacifier until I was almost two, so I can't judge—but apparently he'd decided our bull's-head bait was worth the switch.

The point being: if the World Serpent was shaking, the whole world might be shaking with him.

"So," I said to nobody in particular, "what now?"

"Magnus," Sam said in a strangled tone, "try not to panic. But look off the starboard side."

I couldn't imagine what would be more panic-inducing than Mr. J until I saw the woman in the whirlpool.

Compared to the serpent, she was tiny—only about ten feet tall. From the waist up, she wore a blouse of silver chain mail encrusted with barnacles. She might have once been beautiful, but her pearlescent skin was withered, her seaweed-green eyes were milky with cataracts, and her rippling blond hair was shot through with gray like blight in a wheat field.

From the waist down, things got weird. Spinning around her like a dancer's skirt, a waterspout swirled within a silver fishing net a hundred yards in diameter. Trapped in its weave was a kaleidoscope of ice floe, dead fish, plastic garbage bags, car tires, grocery carts, and other assorted flotsam. As the woman floated toward us, the edge of her net *thwapped* against our hull and scraped against the World Serpent's neck.

She spoke in a deep baritone. "Who dares interrupt my scavenging?"

Harald the frost giant screamed. He was a champion screamer. He scrambled to the bow and threw a bunch of gold coins over the side. Then he turned to Sam. "Quick, girl, your payment to me! Give it to Ran!"

Sam frowned, but she tossed another five coins overboard.

Instead of sinking, the red gold swirled into Ran's net and joined the floating merry-go-round of debris.

"O, Great Ran!" Harald wailed. "Please don't kill me! Here, take my anchor! Take these humans! You can even have my lunch box!"

"Silence!" The goddess shooed away the frost giant, who did his best to cower, grovel, and retreat all at the same time.

"I'll just be belowdecks," he sobbed. "Praying."

Ran regarded me as if deciding whether I was large enough to filet. "Release Jormungand, mortal! The last thing I need today is a world-flooding event."

The World Serpent hissed in agreement.

Ran turned on him. "And you shut up, you overgrown moray. All your writhing is stirring up the silt. I can't see a thing down there. How many times have I told you not to bite at any old rancid bull's head? Rancid bulls' heads are not native to these waters!"

The World Serpent snarled petulantly, tugging at the steel cable in his mouth.

"O, Great Ran," I said, "I am Magnus Chase. This is Sam al-Abbas. We've come to bargain with you. Also, just wondering...why can't you cut

the fishing line yourself?”

Ran let loose a torrent of Norse curses that literally steamed in the air. Now that she was closer, I could see stranger things swirling in her net—ghostly bearded faces, gasping and terrified as they tried to reach the surface; hands clawing at the ropes.

“Worthless einherji,” said the goddess, “you know full well what you have done.”

“I do?” I asked.

“You are Vanir-spawn! A child of Njord?” Ran sniffed the air. “No, your scent is fainter. Perhaps a grandchild.”

Sam’s eyes widened. “Right! Magnus, you’re the son of Frey, son of Njord—god of ships, sailors, and fishermen. That’s why our boat didn’t capsize. That’s why you were able to catch the serpent!” She looked at Ran. “Um, which, of course, we already knew.”

Ran snarled. “Once brought to the surface, the World Serpent is not simply bound by your fishing line. He is connected to you by fate! You must now decide, and quickly, whether to cut him loose and return him to his slumber, or let him awaken fully and destroy your world!”

In the back of my neck, something snapped like a rusty spring—probably the last bit of my courage. I looked at the World Serpent. For the first time, I noticed that his glowing green peepers were covered by a thin translucent membrane—a second set of eyelids.

“You mean he’s only partially awake?”

“If he were fully awake,” said the goddess, “your entire Eastern Seaboard would already be underwater.”

“Ah.” I had to resist the urge to throw away the fishing pole, undo my safety harness, and run around the deck screaming like a little Harald.

“I will release him,” I said. “But first, great Ran, you have to promise to negotiate with us in good faith. We want to barter.”

“Barter with you?” Ran’s skirts swirled faster. Ice and plastic crackled. Shopping carts plowed into one another. “By rights, Magnus Chase, you should *belong* to me! You died of drowning. Drowned souls are *my* property.”

“Actually,” Sam said, “he died in combat, so he belongs to Odin.”

“Technicalities!” Ran snapped.

The faces in Ran’s net gaped and gasped, pleading for help. Sam had told me, *There are worse places to spend your afterlife in than Valhalla.*

Imagining myself tangled in that silvery web, I was suddenly grateful to my Valkyrie.

“Well, okay then,” I said. “I guess I can just let Mr. J wake up fully. I didn’t have any plans for tonight.”

“No!” Ran hissed. “Do you have any idea how hard it is to scavenge along the seafloor when Jormungand gets agitated? Let him go!”

“And you promise to negotiate in good faith?” I asked.

“Yes. Fine. I am in no mood for Ragnarok today.”

“Say, ‘By my troth—’”

“I am a goddess! I know better than to swear by my troth!”

I glanced at Sam, who shrugged. She handed me her ax, and I cut the fishing line.

Jormungand sank beneath the waves, glaring at me through a bubbling green cloud of poison as he descended, as if to say, *NEXT TIME, LITTLE MORTAL.*

Ran’s swirling skirts slowed to the speed of a tropical storm. “Very well, einherji. I promised to barter in good faith. What do you want?”

“The Sword of Summer,” I said. “I had it with me when I hit the Charles River.”

Ran’s eyes glistened. “Oh, yes. I could give you the sword. But in exchange, I would want something valuable. I’m thinking...your soul.”



## My Sword Almost Ends Up on eBay

"I'M THINKING NOT," I REPLIED.

Ran made a rumbling sound like a whale with heartburn. "You—the grandson of that meddler, Njord—come here asking to barter, disturbing the World Serpent, interrupting my scavenging, and you won't even agree to a reasonable offer? The Sword of Summer is the greatest artifact to come into my nets in ages. Your soul is a small price to pay in exchange!"

"Lady Ran." Sam took back her ax and slipped down from the fishing chair. "Magnus has already been claimed by Odin. He is einherji. That cannot be changed."

"Besides," I said, "you don't want my soul. It's really small. I don't use it much. I doubt it even works anymore."

The goddess's watery skirts swirled. Trapped souls clawed for the surface. Plastic garbage bags popped like Bubble Wrap. The smell of dead fish almost made me nostalgic for the bull's head.

"What do you offer me, then?" Ran demanded. "What could possibly be worth that sword?"

*Good question,* I thought.

I stared into the goddess's nets and an idea began to form.

"You said you were scavenging," I recalled. "What for?"

The goddess's expression softened. Her eyes shone a greedier shade of green. "Many things. Coins. Souls. Lost valuables of every description. Just before you woke the serpent, I had my eye on a Chevy Malibu radial hubcap that was worth forty dollars *easy*. Just sitting there at the bottom of the harbor. But now"—she threw up her hands—"gone."

"You collect stuff." I corrected myself: "I mean...wonderful treasures."

Sam squinted at me, clearly wondering if I'd lost my mind, but I was starting to understand what made Ran tick—what she cared about most.

The goddess stretched her fingers toward the horizon. "Have you heard of the Pacific garbage patch?"

"I have, Lady Ran," Sam said. "It's a floating collection of rubbish the size of Texas. It sounds terrible."

"It is amazing," said the goddess. "The first time I saw it, I was overwhelmed! It put my own collection to shame. For centuries, all shipwrecks of the northern seas have been mine to claim. Anything lost in the depths comes to me. But when I saw the wonders of the garbage patch, I realized how puny my efforts had been. Ever since, I've spent all my time scavenging the seafloor, looking for additions to my net. I would not have found your sword if I hadn't been so quick!"

I nodded with sympathy. Now I could fit this Norse goddess into the Magnus Chase worldview. Ran was a bag lady. I could work with a bag lady.

I peered overboard at the floating junk. A silver teaspoon balanced on an island of Styrofoam. A bicycle wheel spun past, shredding the ghostly head of a lost soul.

"Lady Ran," I said, "your husband, Aegir, is the lord of the sea, right? You share a golden palace with him at the bottom of the ocean?"

The goddess scowled. "What is your point?"

"Well...what does your husband think of your collection?"

"Aegir." Ran spat. "The great stirrer of sea storms! These days the only thing he wants to do is brew his mead. He's *always* been a brewer, but lately it's ridiculous. He spends all his time at the hops shop, or going on brewery tours with his buddies. And don't get me started on the flannel shirt, rolled-up skinny jeans, glasses, and the way he trims his beard. He's always talking about microbrews. He has a cauldron a mile wide! How can he *microbrew*?"

“Right,” I said. “That must be annoying. He doesn’t appreciate how important your treasures are.”

“He has his lifestyle,” Ran said. “I have mine!”

Sam looked bewildered, but all of this made total sense to me. I knew a bag lady in Charlestown whose husband had left her a six-million-dollar mansion on Beacon Hill, but sitting at home alone had made her feel suffocated, lonely, and unhappy. So instead she lived out on the streets, pushing her shopping cart, collecting plastic lawn ornaments and aluminum cans. *That* made her feel complete.

Ran frowned. “What were we talking about again?”

“The Sword of Summer,” I said. “And what I could offer you in return.”

“Yes!”

“What I’m offering,” I said, “is to let you keep your collection.”

Frost spread down the ropes of the net. Ran’s tone turned dangerous. “Are you threatening to take my stuff?”

“Oh, no. I would never do that. I understand how valuable—”

“Because this whirling plastic sunflower ornament right here? They don’t make these anymore! It’s easily worth ten dollars.”

“Right. But if you don’t give me the Sword of Summer, Surt and his fire giants will come looking for it. And *they* won’t show you such respect.”

Ran scoffed. “The sons of Muspell cannot touch me. My realm is deadly to them.”

“But Surt has many allies,” Sam said, picking up on the idea. “They would annoy you, harass you, take your...treasures. They’ll do anything to retrieve that sword. Once they have it, they’ll start Ragnarok. Then there will be no more scavenging. The oceans will boil. Your collection will be destroyed.”

“No!” shrieked the goddess.

“Yes,” I said. “But if you give us the sword, Surt won’t have any reason to bother you. We’ll keep it safe.”

Ran scowled at her nets, studying the patterns of glittering trash. “And how, son of Frey, will the sword be safer with you than with me? You cannot return it to your father. Frey gave up his rights to use the weapon when he gifted it to Skirnir.”

For the millionth time, I wanted to find my frolicking summer-god dad and smack him. Why had he given away his weapon in the first place? For

love? Weren't gods supposed to be smarter than that? Then again, Ran collected hubcaps, and Aegir was into microbrewing.

"I'll wield it myself," I said. "Or I'll take it back to Valhalla for safekeeping."

"In other words, you don't know." The goddess arched her kelpy eyebrows at Sam. "And you, daughter of Loki, why are you siding with the gods of Asgard? Your father is no friend of theirs—not anymore."

"I'm not my father," Sam said. "I'm a—I was a Valkyrie."

"Ah, yes. The girl who dreamed of flying. But the thanes of Valhalla expelled you. Why do you still try to earn their favor? You don't need them to fly. You know very well that with your father's blood—"

"Give us the sword, Lady Ran." Sam's voice hardened. "It's the only way to delay Ragnarok."

The goddess smiled sourly. "You even sound like Loki. He was such a persuasive speaker—one moment flattering, the next moment threatening. Once, he actually convinced me to lend him my net! That led to all sorts of trouble. Loki figured out the secrets of net weaving. The gods learned how, then the humans. Pretty soon *everyone* had nets. My trademark item! I won't be so easily convinced again. I'll keep the sword and take my chances with Surt."

I unstrapped myself from the fishing chair. I moved to the tip of the bow and locked eyes with the goddess. I didn't normally shake down bag ladies, but I had to make Ran take me seriously. I lifted the chain from my belt. The silver links glinted in the fading light.

"This chain is also a sword," I said. "An authentic blade from Valhalla. How many of those do you have in your net?"

Ran started to reach for the chain, then caught herself. "Yes...I can see the sword through the glamour. But why would I trade—"

"A new sword for an old one," I offered. "This blade is shinier, only used once in combat. You could get twenty bucks for it, no problem. The Sword of Summer, however, has no resale value."

"Mmm, true, but—"

"The other option," I said, "is I *take* the Sword of Summer. It belongs to me."

Ran growled. Her fingernails stretched into jagged points like shark's teeth. "You dare threaten me, mortal?"

“Just telling the truth,” I said, trying to stay calm. “I can sense the sword within your nets.” (Total lie.) “I pulled it from the depths once before. I can do it again. The sword is the sharpest weapon in the Nine Worlds. Do you really want it cutting through your net, spilling all your stuff and freeing all those trapped souls? If they got away, do you think they’d fight *for* you or against you?”

Her gaze wavered. “You would not dare.”

“Trade me a sword for a sword,” I said. “And throw in one of Idun’s apples for our trouble.”

Ran hissed. “You said nothing about an apple!”

“That’s an easy request,” I said. “I know you’ve got an extra apple of immortality swirling around in there somewhere. Then we’ll go in peace. We’ll stop Ragnarok and let you go back to your scavenging. Otherwise”—I shrugged—“you’ll find out what the son of Frey can do with his father’s sword.”

I was pretty sure the goddess would laugh in my face, capsize the boat, and add our drowned souls to her collection. But I stared her down like I had nothing to lose.

After a count of twenty—long enough for a bead of sweat to trickle down my neck and freeze at my collar—Ran snarled, “Very well.”

She flicked her hand. The Sword of Summer came flying out of the water and landed in my grip. Immediately it began to hum, agitating every molecule in my body.

I tossed my chain overboard. “Now the apple.”

A piece of fruit shot out from the net. It would’ve beaned Sam between the eyes if not for her fast reflexes. The apple didn’t look like much—just a shriveled Golden Delicious—but Sam held it gingerly, as if it were radioactive. She slipped it into her coat pocket.

“Go now, as you promised,” Ran said. “But I tell you this, son of Frey: your high-handed bargaining will cost you dearly. You have made an enemy of Ran. My husband, Aegir, lord of the waves, will also hear about this, if I can ever get him out of the hops shop. For your sake, I hope you’re not planning any more sea voyages. Next time, your kinship with Njord will not save you. Cross my waters again and I will personally drag your soul to the bottom.”

“Well,” I said, “that’s something to look forward to.”

Ran spun. Her form blurred into a misty funnel cloud, her nets wrapping around her like twirled spaghetti. She sank into the depths and was gone.

Sam shuddered. "That was interesting."

Behind us, a ladder creaked. Harald's head popped up from below.

"Interesting?" he demanded. "Did you say it was *interesting*?"

He climbed out, glowering at us, his fists balled, his icy blue beard dripping. "World Serpent fishing—that's one thing. But antagonizing Ran? I never would have taken you aboard if I had known, no matter what Big Boy said! I have to make a living on the ocean! I should throw you overboard—"

"I'll double your price," Sam said. "Ten red gold. Just get us back to dock."

Harald blinked. "Okay." He headed for the wheelhouse.

I studied the Sword of Summer. Now that I had it, I wasn't sure what to do with it. The steel glowed with its own light, silvery runes burning along the flat of the blade. The sword radiated warmth, heating the air around me, melting the frost on the railings, filling me with the same sense of quiet power I felt when I healed someone. It wasn't so much like holding a weapon...more like holding open a door to a different time, walking with my mom in the Blue Hills, feeling the sunlight on my face.

Sam reached over. Still wearing her oversize leather gloves, she brushed a tear from my cheek.

I hadn't realized I was crying.

"Sorry," I said, my voice hoarse.

Sam studied me with concern. "Could you really have summoned the sword from Ran?"

"I don't know."

"In that case, you're insane. But I'm impressed."

I lowered the blade. It kept humming as if trying to tell me something.

"What did Ran mean?" I asked. "She said you didn't need to be a Valkyrie to fly. Something about your father's blood?"

Sam's expression closed up faster than Ran's nets. "It's not important."

"You sure about that?"

She hung her ax on her belt. She looked everywhere but my eyes. "As sure as you could summon that sword."

The outboard engines rumbled. The ship began to turn.

"I'll be at the wheel with Harald," Sam said, apparently anxious to put some distance between us. "I'll make sure he takes us to Boston and not Jotunheim."



## Thou Shalt Not Poop on the Head of Art

AFTER GIVING ME the slightly shriveled apple of immortality, Sam left me at the docks. Not that she wanted to, she said, but her grandparents were going to murder her, and she didn't want to be any later for that. We made plans to meet the next morning at the Public Garden.

I made my way toward Copley Square. I felt a little self-conscious walking the streets with a glowing broadsword, so I had a conversation with my weapon. (Because that wasn't crazy at all.)

"Could you do a glamour and turn into something smaller?" I asked it. "Preferably not a chain, since it's no longer the 1990s?"

The sword didn't reply (duh), but I imagined it was humming at a more interrogative pitch, like, *Such as what?*

"I dunno. Something pocket-size and innocuous. A pen, maybe?"

The sword pulsed, almost like it was laughing. I imagined it saying, *A pen sword. That is the stupidest thing I've ever heard.*

"You have a better idea?" I asked it.

The sword shrank in my hand, melting into a runestone on a gold chain. The small white stone was emblazoned with a black symbol:



“The rune of Frey,” I said. “I’m not really a jewelry guy, but okay.”

I fastened the chain around my neck. I discovered the stone was attached magnetically to its bail, so I could easily pull it off the chain. As soon as I did, the stone grew into a sword. If I wanted it back in pendant form, all I had to do was picture that. The sword shrank into a stone, and I could reattach it to the necklace.

“Cool,” I admitted.

Perhaps the sword really *had* heard my request. Perhaps I’d somehow created the glamour by myself. Or maybe I was hallucinating and wearing a huge sword around my neck.

I doubted anyone would look twice at my new medallion.

They’d see the ¶ and assume it stood for ¶ailure.

By the time I reached Copley Square it was fully dark out. No sign of Blitz or Hearthstone, which made me apprehensive. The library had closed for the night. I wondered if Big Boy expected me to meet him on the roof, but I wasn’t about to climb the walls of the library.

It had been a long day. Einherji superwarrior strength or not, I was exhausted and shaking from hunger. If Big Boy wanted the apple, he would have to come get it. Otherwise I’d eat it myself.

I sat on the front steps of the library, the stone swaying under me like I was still on Harald’s ship. To either side of me, a bronze lady statue reclined on a marble throne. I remembered that one symbolized Art and the other Science, but to me they both looked ready for Recess. They leaned on their armrests, metal shawls covering their heads, glancing in my direction like, *Tough week, huh?*

This was the first time I’d been alone and not in imminent danger since...the funeral home? Did it count as being alone if you were staring at your own dead body?

My memorial service had probably happened by now. I imagined my coffin being lowered into an icy grave; Uncle Randolph leaning on his cane, frowning resentfully; Uncle Frederick looking baffled and distressed in his mismatched clothes; and Annabeth...I couldn’t imagine what she was feeling.

She’d rushed to Boston to find me. She’d learned I was dead. Then she learned I *wasn’t* dead, but she still had to attend my funeral and not tell anyone she’d seen me.

I believed she would keep her promise, but our meeting had unsettled me. Some of the things she'd said: *I can help you. I know a place where you'll be safe.*

I pulled the battered flyer from my coat pocket. MISSING! MAGNUS CHASE, 16 YEARS OLD. PLEASE CALL. I studied Annabeth's phone number, committing it to memory. I owed her an explanation, but not yet. I'd already gotten Hearthstone knocked unconscious, Blitzen half petrified, and Sam kicked out of the Valkyries. I couldn't risk dragging anyone else into my problems.

According to the Norns, Fenris Wolf would be unleashed seven days from now unless I stopped it from happening. Ragnarok would begin. Surt would consume the Nine Worlds in fire. I would never find my mom or get justice for her murder.

Despite all that, every time I thought about facing a wolf—facing *the* Wolf, Fenris himself—I wanted to curl up in my old sleeping bag, stick my fingers in my ears, and hum, *La, la, la, it's not happening.*

A shadow swooped over my head. Big Boy the eagle landed on the bronze statue to my left and promptly decorated her head with eagle droppings.

"Dude," I said, "you just pooped on Art."

"Did I?" Big Boy lifted his tail feathers. "Ah, well. I imagine she's used to it. I see you survived your fishing expedition!"

"Surprised?" I asked.

"Yes, actually. Do you have my apple?"

I pulled it from my pocket and tossed it over. Big Boy caught it in his left claw and began to eat. "Ah, that's the stuff!"

I'd seen some strange things recently, but an eagle eating an apple atop the poopy head of Art was definitely in the top twenty.

"So will you tell me who you are, now?" I asked.

Big Boy burped. "I suppose you've earned it. I'll confess: I'm not really an eagle."

"I'm shocked. Shocked, I tell you."

He snapped off another chunk of apple. "Also, I doubt you'll make many friends among the gods when they learn you've assisted me."

"Wonderful," I said. "I'm already on Ran and Aegir's naughty list."

"Oh, those two aren't properly *gods*. They are neither Aesir nor Vanir. I think they're more giantish, though of course the line between giant and

god has always been blurred. Our clans have intermarried so many times over the years.”

“*Our clans.* Meaning...”

The eagle grew. Shadows folded around him, adding to his size like a snowball gathering mass. His shape resolved into a huge old man lounging in the lap of Art. He wore iron-shod boots, leather britches, and a tunic of eagle feathers that was probably not in compliance with the Endangered Species Act. His hair was gray, his face weathered with age. On one forearm he wore a gold bracer encrusted with bloodstones—the sort of armband worn by the thanes in Valhalla.

“You’re a lord?” I asked.

“A king, in fact.” Big Boy took another bite of apple. Immediately his hair darkened and some of his wrinkles faded. “Utgard-Loki at your service!”

I curled my fingers around my sword pendant. “Loki as in *Loki Loki*?”

The giant king made a sour face. “You have no idea how many times I get that question. *Are you the ‘famous’ Loki?*” He put *famous* in air quotes. “Ugh! I was named Loki before *he* ever came along. It’s a popular name among giants! At any rate—no, Magnus Chase, I am not related to the *famous* Loki. I am Utgard-Loki, meaning Loki of the Outlands, king of the mountain giants. I’ve been watching you for years.”

“I get that a lot.”

“Well, you’re much more interesting than those dense children of Thor who usually challenge me. You’ll make a wonderful enemy!”

Pressure built in my ear canals. “We’re enemies now?”

“Oh, there’s no need to draw your sword just yet. Nice pendant, though. Someday we’ll find ourselves on opposite sides. That can’t be helped. But for the present, I’m happy to observe. I hope you’ll learn to use the sword without getting yourself killed. That would be amusing. Surt, the old bag of smoke, deserves to be humiliated.”

“Well, I’m always happy to amuse you.”

The giant popped the rest of the apple in his mouth and swallowed it whole. He now looked about twenty-five, with coal-black hair, his handsome angular face free of wrinkles.

“Speaking of Surt,” he said, “the fire lord will never let you keep that sword. You have...probably until morning before he realizes that you’ve found it.”

My hand dropped from my pendant. My arms felt like wet sandbags. “I impaled Surt, cut off his nose, and dropped him in an icy river. That didn’t even slow him down?”

“Oh, it did! Right now he’s nothing but a seething noseless ball of fire, raging down in Muspellheim. He’ll have to conserve all his power to manifest again on the day of the full moon.”

“When he tries to free the Wolf.” Maybe I shouldn’t have been chatting about that with a self-declared enemy, but something told me Utgard-Loki already knew.

The giant nodded. “Surt is more anxious than anyone for Ragnarok to start. He knows he’ll get to consume the Nine Worlds in flames, and that’s what he’s been waiting for since the dawn of time. Me, I like the way things are! I’m having fun. But fire giants...ah, there’s no reasoning with them. It’s all burn, burn, burn. Anyway, the good news is that Surt won’t be able to kill you personally until the full moon. He’s much too weak. The bad news: he has lots of minions.”

“I hate minions.”

“Surt’s not the only one after you. Your former comrades from Valhalla have been searching. They’re not pleased that you left without permission.”

I thought about Captain Gunilla and her bandolier of hammers. I imagined one spinning toward my face. “Well, that’s just perfect.”

“If I were you, Magnus, I’d get out of Midgard by dawn. That should throw your pursuers off your trail, at least temporarily.”

“Leave the earth. Simple as that.”

“I knew you were a quick learner.” Utgard-Loki slid off the statue’s lap. Standing up, he was easily twelve feet tall. “We’ll meet again, Magnus Chase. Someday you’ll need a favor only Utgard-Loki can grant. But for now...your friends would like a word. Farewell!”

Shadows funneled around him. Utgard-Loki was gone. In his place stood Blitzen and Hearthstone.

Hearth leaped away from me like a startled cat.

Blitzen dropped his duffel bag. “Heimdall’s Horn, kid! Where did you come from?”

“Where did I—I’ve been here for almost an hour. I was talking to a giant.”

Hearth crept toward me. He poked me in the chest to see if I was real.

*We have been here for hours, he signed. Waiting for you. We talked to giant. You just appeared.*

A sick feeling rose in my chest. “Maybe we should compare notes.”

I told them what had happened since we parted ways: Harald’s boat; Mr. J and Bag Lady Ran (which would make an awesome name for a rapper duo); and my conversation with Utgard-Loki.

“Ah. Not good.” Blitzen stroked his beard. He’d dispensed with the anti-sun gear and was now wearing an eggplant-purple three-piece suit with a mauve dress shirt and a green carnation in the lapel. “The giant told us some of the same things, but...the giant did not tell us his own name.”

Hearth signed, *Surprise*, opening his pinched fingers on either side of his eyes, which in this context I took to mean *YIKES!*

*Utgard-Loki.* He spelled out the name. *Most powerful sorcerer of Jotunheim. Can make any illusion.*

“We were lucky,” Blitz said. “Utgard-Loki could’ve tricked us into seeing or doing *anything*. He could’ve made us walk off a roof, accidentally kill each other, or even eat steak tartar. In fact”—Blitz narrowed his eyes—“we could still be in an illusion. Any of us might be giants.”

Blitzen punched Hearthstone in the arm.

*OUCH!* Hearth signed. He stepped on the dwarf’s toes.

“Or maybe not,” Blitzen decided. “Still, this is very bad. Magnus, you’ve given an apple of immortality to a giant king.”

“And...what does that mean, exactly?”

Blitz fiddled with his carnation. “To be honest, I’m not sure. I’ve never understood how those apples work. I imagine it will make Utgard-Loki stronger as well as younger. And make no mistake, when Ragnarok comes, he won’t be on our side.”

Hearthstone signed: *Wish I’d known it was Utgard-Loki. I could have asked about magic.*

“Hmph,” Blitz said. “You know plenty. Besides, you can’t trust a giant to give you straight answers. Right now, you two need sleep. Elves can’t stay awake very long without sunlight. And Magnus looks like he’s going to fall over.”

Blitz was right. I was starting to see double Blitizens and double Hearthstones, and I didn’t think it had anything to do with illusions.

We made camp in the library doorway, just like old times except with better supplies. Blitz pulled three down sleeping bags out of his duffel,

along with a fresh change of clothes for me and some sandwiches, which I ate too fast to taste. Hearth collapsed in his bag and immediately began snoring.

“Rest,” Blitz told me. “I’ll keep watch. Tomorrow, we visit my kin.”

“The dwarf world?” My thoughts were getting fuzzy. “Your home?”

“My home.” Blitzen sounded uneasy. “Some of the research Hearth and I did today—it’s looking like we’ll need more information about the rope that bound Fenris. We can only get that in Nidavellir.” He focused on the chain around my neck. “Can I see it? The sword?”

I pulled off the pendant and set the sword between us, its light making Blitz’s face glitter like a vein of copper in the dark.

“Breathtaking,” he murmured. “Bone steel...or something even more exotic.”

“Bone steel...T.J. in Valhalla mentioned that.”

Blitz didn’t touch the blade, but he passed his hand over it reverently. “To make steel, iron is smelted with carbon. Most swordsmiths use coal, but you can also use bones—the bones of enemies, or monsters, or ancestors.”

“Oh...” I stared at the blade, wondering if my great-great-grandparents might be in there somewhere.

“Forged correctly,” Blitz said, “bone steel can cut down supernatural creatures, even giants and gods. Of course, you have to quench the blade in blood to harden it, preferably the blood of whatever type of creature you want the sword to be most lethal against.”

The sandwiches weren’t sitting so well in my stomach. “This blade was made like that?”

“I don’t know,” Blitz admitted. “The sword of Frey is Vanir work, which is a mystery to me. It might be closer to Hearth’s elf magic.”

My spirits sank. I’d had this idea that dwarves were good with weapon crafting. In the back of my mind, I’d been hoping Blitzen could tell me something about the blade’s secrets.

I glanced at Hearth, still snoring peacefully. “You said Hearth knew a lot of magic. I’m not criticizing. I’ve just never seen him cast any...well, except maybe opening one door. What else can he do?”

Blitz set his hand protectively next to Hearth’s feet. “Magic drains him. He’s careful about using it. Also his family...”

He took a deep breath. “Modern elves don’t approve of magic. His parents shamed Hearthstone pretty badly. It still makes him self-conscious

about casting magic in front of others. Hearthstone wasn't the son his parents wanted, between the magic and the, you know..." Blitz tapped his own earlobes.

I felt like saying something rude about Hearthstone's parents in sign language. "It's not his fault he's deaf."

"Elves." Blitz shrugged. "They have a low tolerance for anything that isn't perfect—music, art, appearances. Their own children."

I wanted to protest how messed up that was. Then I thought about humans, and I decided we weren't much better.

"Get some sleep, kid," Blitz urged. "Big day tomorrow. To keep Fenris Wolf bound, we're going to need help from a certain dwarf...and that help isn't going to come cheap. We'll need you at full strength when we jump to Nidavellir."

"Jump..." I said. "What do you mean *jump*?"

He gave me a worried look, as if I might be getting another funeral very soon. "In the morning, you're going to try climbing the World Tree."



## Duck!

### CALL ME CRAZY.

I was expecting the World Tree to be a tree. Not a row of bronze ducks.

“Behold!” Blitzen said. “The nexus of the universe!”

Hearthstone knelt reverently.

I glanced at Sam, who had joined us after a daring escape from first period physics. She wasn’t laughing.

“So...” I said, “I’m just going to point out that this is the *Make Way for Ducklings* statue.”

“Do you think it’s a coincidence?” Blitzen demanded. “Nine Worlds? Nine ducks? The symbolism screams *portal*! This spot is the crux of creation, the center of the tree, the easiest place to jump from one duck—I mean one world—to another.”

“If you say so.” I’d passed these bronze ducks a thousand times. I’d never considered them much of a nexus. I hadn’t read the children’s book they were based on, but I gathered it was about a mama duck and her babies crossing a street in Boston, so they put a sculpture of it in the Public Garden.

In the summer, little kids would sit on Mrs. Mallard and get their pictures taken. At Christmas, the ducks got little Santa hats. At the moment they were naked and alone, buried up to their necks in fresh snowfall.

Hearthstone passed his hands over the statues like he was testing a stovetop for heat.

He glanced at Blitz and shook his head.

“As I feared,” Blitz said. “Hearth and I have been traveling too much. We won’t be able to activate the ducks. Magnus, we’ll need you.”

I waited for an explanation, but Blitz just studied the sculptures. He was testing out a new hat this morning—a pith helmet with dark netting that draped to his shoulders. According to Blitz, the net fabric was his own design. It blocked ninety-eight percent of the sunlight, allowing us to see his face while not covering up his fashionable outfit. It made him look like a beekeeper in mourning.

“Okay, I’ll bite,” I said. “How do I activate ducks?”

Sam scanned our surroundings. She didn’t look like she’d slept much. Her eyes were puffy. Her hands were raw and blistered from our fishing expedition. She’d changed into a black wool trench coat, but otherwise she was dressed the same as yesterday: green hijab, ax, shield, jeans, winter boots—all the accoutrements of a fashionable ex-Valkyrie.

“However you do it,” she said, “do it quickly. I don’t like how close we are to the gates of Valhalla.”

“But I don’t know how,” I protested. “Don’t you guys go world-jumping all the time?”

Hearth signed, *Too much.*

“Kid,” Blitz said, “the more frequently you travel between the worlds, the harder it gets. It’s kind of like overheating an engine. At some point, you have to stop and let the engine cool down. Besides, jumping randomly from one world to another is one thing. Traveling on a quest—that’s different. We can’t be sure where exactly we need to go.”

I turned to Sam. “What about you?”

“When I was a Valkyrie, it would’ve been no problem. But now?” She shook her head. “You’re a child of Frey. Your father is the god of growth and fertility. You should be able to coax Yggdrasil’s branches close enough to let us jump on. Besides, it’s your quest. You have the best chance of navigating. Just use the sculpture as a point of focus. Find us the quickest path.”

She would’ve had better luck explaining calculus to me.

I felt stupid, but I knelt next to the sculpture. I touched the duckling at the end of the line. Cold crept up my arm. I sensed ice, fog, and darkness—

somewhere harsh and unwelcoming.

“This,” I decided, “is the quickest way to Niflheim.”

“Excellent,” Blitz said. “Let’s not go there.”

I was just reaching for the next duck when someone yelled, “MAGNUS CHASE!”

Two hundred yards away, on the opposite side of Charles Street, Captain Gunilla stood flanked by two other Valkyries. Behind them was a line of einherjar. I couldn’t make out their expressions, but the gray looming mass of X the half-troll was unmistakable. Gunilla had drafted my own hallmates to fight against me.

My fingers twitched with anger. I wanted to get a meat hook and go fishing with Gunilla as bait. I reached for my pendant.

“Magnus, no,” Sam said. “Concentrate on the ducks. We have to change worlds now.”

On either side of Gunilla, the Valkyries slung glowing spears from their backs. They yelled at the einherjar to ready their weapons. Gunilla pulled two of her hammers and threw them in our direction.

Sam deflected one with her shield. She knocked the other aside with her ax, spinning the hammer into the nearest willow tree, where it embedded itself up to the handle. Across the street, all three Valkyries rose into the air.

“I can’t fight them all,” Sam warned. “It’s leave now or be captured.”

My anger turned to panic. I looked at the row of bronze ducks, but my concentration was shattered. “I—I need more time.”

“We don’t *have* time!” Sam deflected another hammer. The force of the blow cracked her shield down the middle.

“Hearth.” Blitzen nudged the elf’s arm. “Now would be good.”

A frown tugged at the corners of Hearthstone’s mouth. He reached into his pouch and pulled out a runestone. He cupped it in his hands and muttered to it silently, as if speaking to a captured bird. He threw the stone into the air.

It exploded above us, creating a rune of burning golden light:



Between Gunilla’s hunting party and us, distance seemed to elongate. The Valkyries flew toward us at top speed; my einherjar comrades drew their weapons and charged; but they made no progress.

It reminded me of those cheap 1970s cartoons where a character runs but the scenery behind him just keeps repeating itself. Charles Street spiraled around our pursuers like a giant hamster wheel. For the first time, I got what Sam had told me about runes being able to change reality.

“*Raidho*,” Blitzen said appreciatively. “It stands for the wheel, the journey. Hearthstone has bought you some time.”

*Only seconds*, Hearth signed. *Hurry*.

He promptly collapsed into Sam’s arms.

I ran my hands quickly across the bronze ducks. At the fourth one, I stopped. I felt warmth, safety...a sense of rightness.

“This one,” I said.

“Well, open it!” Blitzen shouted.

I rose to my feet. Not sure what I was doing, I pulled my pendant from its chain. The Sword of Summer appeared in my hands. Its blade purred like a demented cat. I tapped it against the bronze duck and sliced upward.

The air parted like a curtain. Stretching in front of me, instead of a sidewalk, was an expanse of tree branches. The nearest one, as wide as Beacon Street, ran directly under us, maybe three feet down, suspended over a gray void. Unfortunately, the cut I’d made in the fabric of Midgard was already closing.

“Hurry!” I said. “Jump!”

Blitzen didn’t hesitate. He leaped through the rift.

Over on Charles Street, Gunilla screamed in outrage. She and her Valkyries were still flying full-tilt on their cartoon hamster wheel, the einherjar stumbling along behind them.

“You are doomed, Magnus Chase!” Gunilla shouted. “We will pursue you to the ends of—”

With a loud *POP*, Hearth’s spell broke. The einherjar fell face first in the street. The three Valkyries shot over our heads. Judging from the sound of breaking glass, they must have hit a building over on Arlington Street.

I didn’t wait for my old hallmates to recover their senses.

I grabbed Hearth’s left arm while Sam took his right. Together, we leaped into the World Tree.



## I Am Trash-Talked by a Squirrel

I ALWAYS LIKED CLIMBING TREES.

My mom had been pretty understanding about that. She'd only get nervous if I got above twenty feet. Then a little tension crept into her voice. "Pumpkin, that branch may not hold you. Could you come down a little?"

On the World Tree, *every* branch would hold me. The biggest ones were wider than Interstate 93. The smallest were as large as your average redwood. As for Yggdrasil's trunk, it was so immense it just didn't compute. Each crevice in its surface seemed to lead to a different world, as if someone had wrapped tree bark around a column of television monitors glowing with a million different movies.

The wind roared, ripping at my new denim jacket. Beyond the tree's canopy I saw nothing but a hazy white glow. Below was no ground—just more branches crisscrossing the void. The tree had to be rooted somewhere, but I felt woozy and unbalanced—as if Yggdrasil and everything it contained, including my world, was free-floating in primordial mist—the Ginnungagap.

If I fell here, in the best-case scenario I'd hit another branch and break my neck. Worst-case scenario, I'd keep falling forever into the Great White Nothingness.

I must've been leaning forward, because Blitzen grabbed my arm.  
“Careful kid. First time in the tree will make you dizzy.”

“Yeah, I noticed.”

Hearthstone still sagged between Sam and me. He tried to find his footing, but his ankles kept bending in odd directions.

Sam stumbled. Her broken shield slipped from her grip and somersaulted into the abyss.

She crouched, a look of barely controlled panic in her eyes. “I liked Yggdrasil a lot better when I could fly.”

“What about Gunilla and the others?” I asked. “Will they be able to follow us?”

“Not easily,” Sam said. “They can open another portal, but it won’t necessarily lead to the same branch of the tree. Still, we should keep moving. Being on Yggdrasil is not good for your sanity.”

Hearthstone managed to stand on his own. He signed: *I’m okay. Let’s go.* Though his hands were so shaky it looked more like: *You are a rabbit tunnel.*

We moved farther along the branch.

The Sword of Summer hummed in my hand, tugging me along like it knew where we were going. I hoped it did, anyway.

Hostile winds buffeted us from side to side. Branches swayed, throwing deep pools of shadow and brilliant patches of light across our path. A leaf the size of a canoe fluttered by.

“Stay focused,” Blitzen told me. “That feeling you had when you opened the portal? Look for it again. Find us an exit.”

After walking about a quarter of a mile, we found a smaller branch crossing directly under ours. My sword hummed louder, tugging to the right.

I looked at my friends. “I think we need to take this exit.”

Changing branches might sound easy, but it involved sliding down ten feet from one curved surface to another, with the wind howling and the branches swaying apart. Amazingly, we managed it without anyone getting crushed or falling into oblivion.

Navigating the narrower branch was worse. It bobbed more violently under our feet. At one point I got flattened by a leaf—like a green tarp dropping on top of me out of nowhere. At another point I looked down and realized I was standing over a crack in the bark. Half a mile down, *inside*

the branch, I could see a snow-capped mountain range, as if I were standing in a glass-bottom airplane.

We picked our way through a maze of lichen patches that looked like hills of burned marshmallows. I made the mistake of touching one. My hand sunk up to my wrist and I almost couldn't pull it free.

Finally the lichen dispersed into smaller clumps like burned marshmallow sofas. We followed our branch until it split into half a dozen unclimbable twigs. The Sword of Summer seemed to go to sleep in my hand.

"Well?" Sam asked.

I peered over the side. About thirty feet below us, a larger branch swayed. In the middle of that branch, a hot-tub-size knothole glowed with soft warm light.

"That's it," I said. "That's our way out."

Blitzen scowled. "You sure? Nidavellir isn't warm and glowy."

"I'm just telling you—the sword seems to think that's our destination."

Sam whistled silently. "Quite a jump. If we miss the hole..."

Hearthstone spelled out, *S-P-L-A-T*.

A gust of wind hit us, and Hearth stumbled. Before I could catch him, he fell backward into a clump of lichen. His legs were promptly swallowed in the marshmallow gunk.

"Hearth!" Blitzen scrambled to his side. He pulled at Hearth's arms, but the mucky lichen held on to his legs like a needy toddler.

"We can cut him out," said Sam. "Your sword, my ax. It'll take time. We'll have to be careful of his legs. But it could be worse."

Naturally, things got worse. From somewhere above us came an explosive *YARK!*

Blitzen crouched under his pith helmet. "Ratatosk! That damnable squirrel *always* appears at the worst time. Hurry with those blades!"

Sam cut into the lichen with her ax, but her blade stuck. "This is like cutting through melting tires! It's not going to be quick."

*GO!* Hearth signed. *Leave me.*

"Not an option," I said.

*YAAAAAARRRK!* The sound was much louder this time. A dozen branches above us, a large shadow passed across the leaves.

I hefted my sword. "We'll fight the squirrel. We can do that, right?"

Sam looked at me like I was mad. “Ratatosk is invulnerable. There is no fighting him. Our options are running, hiding, or dying.”

“We can’t run,” I said. “And I’ve already died twice this week.”

“So we hide.” Sam unwrapped her hijab. “At least, Hearth and I do. I can cover two people, no more. You and Blitz run—find the dwarves. We’ll meet up with you later.”

“What?” I wondered if Utgard-Loki was messing with her brain somehow. “Sam, you can’t hide under a green piece of silk! The squirrel can’t be that stupid...”

She shook out the fabric. It grew to the size of a twin sheet, the colors rippling until the hijab was exactly the same brown and yellow and white of the lichen patch.

*She’s right,* Hearth signed. *GO.*

Sam crouched next to him and pulled the hijab over them both, and they vanished, blending perfectly against the lichen.

“Magnus.” Blitz tugged at my arm. “It’s now or never.” He pointed to the branch below. The knothole was closing.

At that moment, Ratatosk broke through foliage above. If you can imagine a Sherman tank covered in red fur, barreling down the side of a tree...well, the squirrel was way scarier than that. His front teeth were twin wedges of white enamel terror. His claws were scimitars. His eyes were sulfur yellow, burning with fury.

**YARK!** The squirrel’s battle cry pierced my eardrums. A thousand insults were packed into that one sound, all of them invading my brain, drowning out any rational thought.

*You have failed.*

*No one likes you.*

*You are dead.*

*Your dwarf’s pith helmet is stupid.*

*You could not save your mother.*

I fell to my knees. A sob built in my chest. I probably would have died then and there if Blitz hadn’t hauled me up with all his dwarven strength and slapped me across the face.

I couldn’t hear him, but I read his lips well enough: “NOW, KID!”

Gripping my hand in rough calloused fingers, he jumped off the branch, dragging me with him into the wind.



## I Break Down in a Volkswagen

I STOOD IN A SUNLIT meadow with no memory of how I got there.

In the distance, wildflowers dusted rolling green hills. The breeze smelled of lavender. The light was warm and rich as if the air had turned to butter.

My thoughts moved sluggishly. Light...sunlight was bad for dwarves. I was pretty sure I'd been traveling with a dwarf—someone who had slapped me and saved my life.

“Blitz?”

He stood to my left, holding his pith helmet at his side.

“Blitz, your hat!”

I was afraid he'd already become stone.

Then he turned. His eyes were stormy and distant. “It’s okay, kid. This isn’t regular sunlight. We’re not on Midgard anymore.”

He sounded like he was talking through wax paper. The squirrel’s yap had left a crackling in my ears and some corrosive thoughts rattling around in my brain.

“Ratatosk...” I couldn’t finish the sentence. Just saying his name made me want to curl up in the fetal position.

“Yeah,” Blitz said. “His bark is literally worse than his bite. He...” Blitz looked down, blinking rapidly. “He’s the most destructive creature in the

World Tree. He spends his time running up and down the trunk, carrying insults from the eagle who lives at the top to Nidhogg, the dragon who lives at the roots.”

I gazed toward the hills. Faint sounds of music seemed to be coming from that direction, or maybe it was the static in my ears. “Why would a squirrel do that?”

“To damage the tree,” Blitz said. “Ratatosk keeps the eagle and the dragon whipped into a frenzy. He tells them lies, rumors, nasty gossip about each other. His words can...well, you know what his words can do. The dragon Nidhogg is always chewing on the roots of the World Tree, trying to kill it. The eagle flaps his wings and creates windstorms that rip the branches and cause devastation throughout the Nine Worlds. Ratatosk makes sure the two monsters stay angry and in competition with each other, to see which one can destroy their end of Yggdrasil faster.”

“But that’s...crazy. The squirrel *lives* in the tree.”

Blitz grimaced. “We all do, kid. People have destructive impulses. Some of us want to see the world in ruins just for the fun of it...even if we’re ruined along with it.”

Ratatosk’s chatter echoed in my head: *You have failed. You could not save your mother.* The squirrel had driven me to despair, but I could see how his bark might stir up other emotions—hatred, bitterness, self-loathing.

“How did you keep your wits?” I asked Blitz. “When the squirrel barked, what did you hear?”

Blitz ran his fingers across the brim of his pith helmet, pinching the edge of the black veil. “Nothing I don’t tell myself all the time, kid. We should get going.”

He trudged off toward the hills. Despite his short stride, I had to power walk to keep up.

We crossed a stream where a picturesque little frog sat on a lily pad. Doves and falcons spiraled through the air like they were playing tag. I half expected a chorus line of fuzzy animals to pop out of the wildflowers and launch into a Disney musical number.

“I’m guessing this is not Nidavellir,” I said as we climbed the hill.

Blitzen snorted. “No. Much worse.”

“Alfheim?”

“Worse.” Blitzen stopped just short of the crest and took a deep breath. “Come on. Let’s get this over with.”

At the top of the hill I froze. “Whoa.”

Down the other side, green fields stretched to the horizon. Meadows were strewn with picnic blankets. Crowds of people were hanging out—eating, laughing, chatting, playing music, flying kites, tossing beach balls. It was the world’s largest, most laid-back outdoor concert, minus the concert. Some folks were dressed in various bits of armor. Most had weapons, but they didn’t seem very interested in using them.

In the shade of an oak tree, a couple of young ladies were sword fighting, but after crossing blades a few times, they got bored, dropped their weapons, and started chatting. Another guy lounged in a lawn chair, flirting with the girl on his left while he casually parried attacks from the guy standing on his right.

Blitz pointed to the crest of the next hill about half a mile away, where a strange palace gleamed. It looked like an upside-down Noah’s Ark made of gold and silver.

“Sessrumnir,” said Blitzen. “The Hall of Many Seats. If we’re lucky, maybe she won’t be home.”

“Who?”

Instead of answering, he waded into the crowd.

We hadn’t gone twenty feet before a guy on a nearby picnic blanket called, “Hey, Blitzen! What’s up, dude?”

Blitzen ground his teeth so hard I could hear them popping. “Hello, Miles.”

“Yeah, I’m good!” Miles raised his sword absently as another guy in beach trunks and a muscle shirt charged toward him with a battle-ax.

The attacker screamed, “DIE! Ha, ha, just kidding.” Then he walked away eating a chocolate bar.

“So, Blitz,” Miles said, “what brings you to Casa de Awesome?”

“Nice seeing you, Miles.” Blitzen grabbed my arm and led me onward.

“Okay, cool!” Miles called after us. “Keep in touch!”

“Who was that?” I asked.

“Nobody.”

“How do you know him?”

“I don’t.”

As we made our way toward the upside-down ark mansion, more people stopped and said hello to Blitzen. A few greeted me and complimented me

on my sword, or my hair, or my shoes. One girl said, “Oh, nice ears!” Which didn’t even make sense.

“Everybody is so—”

“Stupid?” Blitzen offered.

“I was going to say *mellow*.”

He grunted. “This is Folkvanger, the Field of the Army...or you could translate it as the People’s Battlefield.”

“So this is Volkswagen.” I scanned the crowds, wondering if I would spot my mother, but I couldn’t imagine her in a place like this. There was too much lounging around, not enough action. My mom would’ve rousted these warriors to their feet, led them on a ten-mile hike, then insisted they set up their own campsites if they wanted any dinner. “They don’t seem like much of an army.”

“Yeah, well,” Blitz said, “these fallen are just as powerful as the einherjar, but they have a different attitude. This realm is one little subsection of Vanaheim—sort of the Vanir gods’ flipside version of Valhalla.”

I tried to picture myself spending eternity here. Valhalla had its good points, but as far as I’d seen it didn’t have picnics or beach balls, and I definitely wouldn’t describe it as mellow. Still...I wasn’t sure I liked Folkvanger any better.

“So half the worthy dead go here,” I remembered, “half go to Valhalla. How do they pick who goes where? Is it a coin toss?”

“That would make more sense, actually.”

“But I was trying to get us to Nidavellir. Why did we come here?”

Blitzen stared at the mansion atop the hill. “You were looking for the path we needed for our quest. That path led us through Folkvanger. Unfortunately, I think I know why. Let’s go pay our respects before I lose my nerve.”

As we approached the gates, I realized Sessrumnir wasn’t just built to look like an upside-down ship. It actually *was* an upside-down ship. The rows of tall windows were oar slots. The sloping walls of the hull were made from clinkered gold planks riveted with silver nails. The main entrance had a long awning that would’ve served as a gangplank.

“Why is it a boat?” I asked.

“What?” Blitzen fiddled nervously with his carnation. “Not so unusual. Your Norse ancestors made lots of buildings by turning their ships upside

down. In the case of Sessrumnir, when the Day of Doom comes around, they'll just flip the palace over and *voilà*, it's a vessel big enough for all the warriors of Folkvanger to sail nobly to their deaths. Sort of like we're doing now."

He led me inside.

I'd been expecting a gloomy interior like the hold of a ship, but the Hall of Many Seats was more like a cathedral. The ceiling rose all the way to the keel. The oar-hole windows crosshatched the air with bars of light. The entire space was open, no separate rooms or partitions—just clusters of sofas, comfy chairs, throw pillows, and freestanding hammocks, most of which were occupied by snoring warriors. I hoped the half million inhabitants of Folkvanger liked one another's company, because there was *no* privacy. Me being me, the main thing I wondered was where they all went to the bathroom.

Down the center of the hall ran an aisle of Persian carpets, flanked by braziers with glowing spheres of gold light. At the far end stood a throne on a raised dais.

Blitz marched in that direction, ignoring the warriors who greeted him with "Dude!" and "Sup, Dwarf Man!" and "Welcome home!"

*Welcome home?*

In front of the dais, a cozy fire crackled in the hearth. Piles of jewelry and precious gems glittered here and there as if somebody had swept them up just to get them off the floor. On either side of the steps lounged a calico house cat the size of a saber-toothed tiger.

The throne was carved from wood as soft and buttery as the light—linden wood, maybe. The back was draped with a cloak of downy feathers like on the underside of a falcon. In the throne itself sat the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen.

She looked maybe twenty years old, surrounded by an aura of golden radiance that made me realize what Blitzen meant earlier when he'd said the daylight here wasn't normal. The entire realm of Folkvanger was warm and bright, not because of the sun, but because it basked in this woman's power.

Her blond hair fell across her shoulder in a single long plait. Her white halter top showed off her tan shoulders and smooth midriff. Her knee-length skirt was belted with a gold braid holding a sheathed knife and a ring of keys. Around her neck was a dazzling piece of jewelry—a lacework collar

of gold and gems, like Ran's net in miniature, except with rubies and diamonds instead of sailors' souls and hubcaps.

The woman fixed me with her sky-blue eyes. When she smiled, heat traveled from the tips of my ears right down to my toes. I would have done anything to make her keep smiling at me. If she'd told me to jump off the World Tree into oblivion, I would've done it in a second.

I remembered her picture from my old children's mythology book, and realized how ridiculously it undersold her beauty.

*The goddess of love was very pretty! She had cats!*

I knelt before my aunt, the twin sister of my father. "Freya."

"My dear Magnus," she said, "how nice to meet you in person!" She turned to Blitzen, who was glowering at his boots.

"And how are you, Blitzen?" asked the goddess.

Blitzen sighed. "I'm fine, Mom."



## Freya Is Pretty! She Has Cats!

“MOM?” I WAS SO STARTLED I wasn’t sure I’d said it aloud. “Wait... You, Blitzen. *Mom*? ”

Blitzen kicked me in the shin.

Freya continued smiling. “I suppose my son didn’t tell you? He’s quite modest. Blitzen dear, you look very nice, but could you straighten your collar?”

Blitzen did, muttering under his breath, “Been a little busy running for my life.”

“And, dear,” Freya said, “are you sure about the vest?”

“Yes, Mom,” Blitz grumbled, “I’m sure about the vest. Vests are making a comeback.”

“Well, I suppose you know best.” Freya winked at me. “Blitzen is a *genius* with fabrics and fashion. The other dwarves don’t appreciate his expertise, but I think it’s marvelous. He wants to open his own—”

“Anyway,” Blitzen said, a little too loudly, “we’re on this quest....”

Freya clapped. “I know! It’s very exciting. You’re trying to get to Nidavellir to find out more about the rope Gleipnir. And so, naturally, the World Tree directed you first to me.”

One of her cats clawed at a Persian rug, ripping several thousand dollars of weaving into fluff. I tried not to imagine what the cat could do to me.

“So, Lady Freya,” I said, “can you help us?”

“Of course!” said the goddess. “More importantly, you can help *me*.”

“Here we go,” said Blitzen.

“Son, be polite. First, Magnus, how are you faring with your sword?”

I missed a beat.

I guess I still didn’t think of the Sword of Summer as *mine*. I pulled off the pendant and the blade took shape in my hand. In Freya’s presence, it was silent and still like it was playing dead. Maybe it was afraid of cats.

“I haven’t had much time to use it,” I said. “Just got it back from Ran.”

“Yes, I know.” Freya’s nose wrinkled with the slightest hint of distaste. “And you delivered an apple to Utgard-Loki in exchange. Perhaps not the wisest move, but I won’t criticize your choices.”

“You just did,” Blitzen said.

The goddess ignored his comment. “At least you didn’t promise *me* to Utgard-Loki. Usually when giants make demands, they want apples *and* my hand in marriage.” She flipped her braid over her shoulder. “It gets very tiresome.”

I had a hard time looking at Freya without staring. There really wasn’t anything safe to focus on—her eyes, her lips, her belly button. I silently scolded myself, *This is Blitzen’s mom! This is my aunt!*

I decided to focus on her left eyebrow. There was nothing entrancing about a left eyebrow.

“So anyway,” I said, “I haven’t really killed anything yet with the eyebrow—I mean the sword.”

Freya sat forward. “*Killed* anything with it? Oh, dear, that’s the least of its powers. Your first task is to befriend the sword. Have you done this?”

I imagined the sword and me sitting side by side in a movie theater, a tub of popcorn between us. I imagined dragging the sword on a leash, taking it for a walk through the park. “How do I befriend a sword?”

“Ah...well, if you have to ask—”

“Look, Aunt Freya,” I said, “couldn’t I just give the sword to you for safekeeping? It’s a Vanir weapon. You’re Frey’s sister. You’ve got a few hundred thousand well-armed, laid-back warriors to guard it from Surt—”

“Oh, no,” she said sadly. “The sword is already in your hands, Magnus. You summoned it from the river. You have laid claim to it. The best we can hope for is that *Sumarbrander*, the Sword of Summer, will allow you to use

it. Keeping it from Surt is *your* job now, as long as you manage to stay alive.”

“I hate my job.”

Blitz elbowed me. “Don’t say that, kid. You’ll offend the blade.”

I looked down at the gleaming runes on the blade. “I’m sorry, long sharp piece of metal. Did that hurt your feelings? Also, if you *allow* people to wield you, why would you allow an evil fire giant to do so? Why wouldn’t you want to go back to Frey, or at least his lovely sister here?”

The sword did not reply.

“Magnus,” said the goddess, “this is no jesting matter. The sword is fated to belong to Surt, sooner or later. You know this. The sword cannot escape its destiny any more than you can escape yours.”

I envisioned Loki chuckling as he lounged on the High Seat of Odin. *Our choices can alter the details. That’s how we rebel against destiny.*

“Besides,” Freya said, “the sword would never allow me to use it. Sumarbrander holds me partially responsible for its loss....It resents me almost as much as it resents Frey.”

Maybe it was my imagination, but the sword seemed to become colder and heavier.

“But it’s Frey’s sword,” I protested.

Blitzen grunted. “It *was*. I told you, kid, he gave it away for love.”

The calico cat on Freya’s right rolled over and stretched. Its spotted tummy was pretty cute, except for the fact that I kept imagining how many warriors it could comfortably digest.

“When Frey sat on Odin’s throne,” continued the goddess, “he did so for *my* sake. It was a dark time for me. I was wandering the Nine Worlds, grieving and bereft. Frey hoped that by sitting in the throne, he might find me. Instead, the throne showed him his heart’s desire—a frost giantess, Gerd. He fell madly in love with her.”

I stared at Freya’s eyebrow. Her story wasn’t helping my opinion of my dad.

“He fell in love at first sight...with a frost giantess.”

“Oh, she was beautiful,” Freya said. “Silver to Frey’s gold, cold to his warmth, winter to his summer. You’ve heard that opposites attract? She was his perfect match. But she was a giant. She would never agree to marry a Vanir. Her family would not allow it. Knowing this, Frey fell into despair.

Crops stopped growing. Summer lost its warmth. Finally, Frey's servant and best friend came to ask him what was wrong."

"Skirmir," I said. "The dude who got the sword."

Freya frowned. "Yes. *Him*."

Blitzen took a step back, like he was afraid his mom might explode. For the first time, I realized how scary the goddess could look—beautiful, yes, but also terrifying and powerful. I imagined her armed with a shield and spear, riding with the Valkyries. If I saw her on the battlefield, I would run the other direction.

"Skirmir promised he could deliver Gerd within nine days," said the goddess. "All he required was a small fee for his services—the Sword of Summer. Frey was so love-stricken that he asked no questions. The sword...I can only imagine how it felt when it was betrayed by its master. It allowed Skirmir to wield it, though not happily."

Freya sighed. "That is why the sword will never allow Frey to use it again. And that is why, at Ragnarok, Frey is fated to die because he does not have his weapon."

I wasn't sure what to say. *Bummer* didn't seem to cover it. I remembered Loki's warning about sitting on Odin's throne, looking for my heart's desire. What would I look for? My mother's whereabouts. Would I give up a sword to find her? Of course. Would I risk getting killed or even hastening Doomsday? Yes. So maybe I couldn't judge my father.

Blitz gripped my arm. "Don't look so glum, kid. I have faith in you."

Freya's expression softened. "Yes, Magnus. You *will* learn to use the sword—and I don't mean just swinging it like a brute. Once you discover its full abilities, you will be formidable indeed."

"I don't suppose it comes with a user's manual?"

Freya laughed gently. "I'm sorry I didn't get you in Folkvanger, Magnus. You would've been a good addition to my followers. But Valhalla called you first. It was meant to be."

I wanted to argue that the Norns, the einherjar, and the captain of the Valkyries didn't seem to think so.

Thinking about Gunilla made me remember our flight into the World Tree, and Sam and Hearthstone hiding under a veil from a murderous squirrel. "Our friends...we got separated from them on Yggdrasil. Freya, do you know if they made it here safely?"

Freya peered into the distance. “They are not in Folkvanger. I see them... Yes. Wait. Lost them again. Ah!” She winced. “That was a close call, but they’re fine for the moment. A resourceful pair. I sense they will not come here. You must continue on and meet them in Nidavellir. Which brings us to your quest.”

“And how we can help you,” Blitz said.

“Exactly, darling. Your need brought you here. *Need* speaks strongly when you travel the World Tree. After all, that’s how my poor son found himself being a bondservant to Mimir.”

“We’re not having this discussion again,” Blitz said.

Freya turned over her lovely hands. “Fine. Moving along. As you well know, the dwarves created the rope Gleipnir, which bound Fenris Wolf....”

“Yes, Mom,” Blitz said, rolling his eyes. “Everyone learns that nursery rhyme in kindergarten.”

I squinted at him. “Nursery rhyme?”

“*Gleipnir, Gleipnir, strong and stout, wrapped the Wolf around the snout.*’ Humans don’t learn that one?”

“Um...I don’t think so.”

“At any rate,” said the goddess, “the dwarves will be able to tell you more about how the rope was made, and how it might be replaced.”

“Replaced?” I willed the sword back into pendant form. Even so, hanging around my neck, it seemed to weigh a hundred pounds. “I thought the idea was to keep the rope from getting cut in the first place.”

“Ah...” Freya tapped her lips. “Magnus, I don’t want to discourage you, but I’d say there is a good chance, perhaps a seventy-five percent chance, that even if you keep the sword from Surt, the fire giant will still find a way to free Fenris Wolf. In such a case, you must be prepared with a replacement rope.”

My tongue felt almost as heavy as my sword pendant. “Yeah, that’s not at all discouraging. The last time the Wolf was free, didn’t it take all the gods working together to bind him?”

Freya nodded. “It took three tries and much trickery. Poor Tyr lost his hand. But don’t worry. The Wolf will never fall for the hand-in-the-mouth trick again. If it comes to that, you will have to find another way to bind him.”

I bet Miles out in the People’s Battlefield didn’t have these sorts of problems. I wondered if he’d be interested in trading places for a while,

going after Fenris Wolf while I played volleyball. “Freya, can you at least tell us where the Wolf is?”

“On Lyngvi—the Isle of Heather.” The goddess tapped her chin. “Let’s see, today is Thor’s Day the sixteenth.”

“You mean Thursday?”

“That’s what I said. The island will rise on the full moon six days from now, on the twenty-second, which is Woden’s Day.”

“Wednesday?” I asked.

“That’s what I said. So you should have plenty of time to get my earrings before you seek out the Wolf. Unfortunately, the island’s location shifts every year as the branches of Yggdrasil sway in the winds of the void. The dwarves should be able to help you locate it. Blitzen’s father knew the way. Others might as well.”

At the mention of his father, Blitz’s face clouded over. Very carefully, he took the carnation from his vest and tossed it into the hearth fire. “And what do you want, Mother? What’s your part in this?”

“Oh, my needs are simple.” Her fingers fluttered over her golden lace collar. “I want you to commission some earrings to match my necklace Brisingamen. Something nice. Not too flashy, but noticeable. Blitzen, you have excellent taste. I trust you.”

Blitzen glared at the nearest pile of riches, which contained dozens, maybe hundreds of earrings. “You know who I have to talk to in Nidavellir. Only one dwarf has the skill to replace the rope Gleipnir.”

“Yes,” Freya agreed. “Fortunately, he’s also an excellent jeweler, so he will be able to accommodate both our requests.”

“Unfortunately,” said Blitzen, “this particular dwarf wants me dead.”

Freya waved aside his objection. “Oh, he can’t possibly. Not after all this time.”

“Dwarves have very long memories, Mother.”

“Well, generous payment will soften his attitude. I can help with that.” She called across the hall, “Dmitri? I need you!”

From one of the sofa clusters, three guys scrambled to their feet, grabbed their musical instruments, and hustled over. They wore matching Hawaiian shirts, Bermuda shorts, and sandals. Their hair was greased back in pompadours. The first guy had a guitar. The second had bongos. The third had a triangle.

The guy with the guitar bowed to Freya. “At your service, my lady!”

Freya gave me a conspiratorial smile, as if she had some wonderful secret to share. “Magnus, meet Dmitri and the Do-Runs, the best band you’ve never heard of. They died in 1963, just as they were about to get their big break. So sad! They valiantly swerved their car off Route One to spare a busload of schoolchildren from a terrible collision. In honor of their selfless deaths, I brought them here to Folkvanger.”

“And we’re very grateful, my lady,” said Dmitri. “Being your house band has been a sweet gig!”

“Dmitri, I need to cry,” she said. “Could you please play the one about my lost husband? I love that song.”

“I hate that song,” Blitzen mumbled under his breath.

The trio hummed. Dmitri strummed a chord.

I whispered to Blitzen, “Why does your mom need to cry?”

He turned toward me and made a finger-down-the-throat gesture. “Just watch. You’ll see.”

Dmitri began to sing:

*“Oh, Odur! Od, Od, Odur,  
Where is that Odur; where is my love?”*

The other two musicians harmonized on the chorus:

*“Od wanders far, my Odur is missing,  
How odd it is, not to be kissing  
My Odur! My sweet Od Odur!”*

Triangle.

Bongo solo.

Blitzen whispered, “Her godly husband was an Aesir named Odur, Od for short.”

I wasn’t sure which name was worse.

“He disappeared?” I guessed.

“Two thousand years ago,” Blitzen said. “Freya went looking for him, disappeared herself for almost a century while she searched. She never found him, but that’s why Frey sat in Odin’s chair in the first place—to look for his sister.”

The goddess leaned forward and cupped her face in her hands. She drew a shaky breath. When she looked up again, she was weeping—but her tears

were small pellets of red gold. She wept until her hands were full of glittering droplets.

“Oh, Odur!” she sobbed. “Why did you leave me? I miss you still!”

She sniffled and nodded to the musicians. “Thank you, Dmitri. That’s enough.”

Dmitri and his friends bowed. Then the best band I wished I’d never heard of shuffled away.

Freya raised her cupped hands. Out of nowhere, a leather pouch appeared, hovering above her lap. Freya spilled her tears into the bag.

“Here, my son.” Freya passed the pouch to Blitzen. “That should be enough payment if Eitri Junior is at all reasonable.”

Blitzen stared glumly at the pouch of tears. “The only problem is, he’s *not*.”

“You will succeed!” Freya said. “The fate of my earrings is in your hands!”

I scratched the back of my neck. “Uh, Lady Freya...thanks for the tears and all, but couldn’t you just go to Nidavellir and pick out your own earrings? I mean, isn’t shopping half the fun?”

Blitzen shot me a warning look.

Freya’s blue eyes turned a few degrees colder. Her fingertips traced the filigree of her necklace. “No, Magnus, I *can’t* just go shopping in Nidavellir. You *know* what happened when I bought Brisingamen from the dwarves. Do you want that to happen again?”

Actually, I had no idea what she was talking about, but she didn’t wait for an answer.

“Every time I go to Nidavellir, I get myself in trouble,” she said. “It’s not my fault! The dwarves *know* my weakness for beautiful jewelry. Believe me, it’s *much* better that I send you. Now, if you’ll excuse me, it’s time for our evening luau with optional combat. Good-bye, Magnus. Good-bye, my darling Blitzen!”

The floor opened beneath us, and we fell into darkness.



## My Friend Evolved from a—Nope. I Can’t Say It

### I DON’T REMEMBER LANDING.

I found myself on a dark street on a cold, cloudy night. Three-story clapboard row houses edged the sidewalk. At the end of the block, a tavern’s grimy windows glowed with neon drink signs.

“This is Southie,” I said. “Around D Street.”

Blitzen shook his head. “This is Nidavellir, kid. It looks like South Boston...or rather, South Boston looks like *it*. I told you, Boston is the nexus. The Nine Worlds blend together there and affect one another. Southie has a definite dwarvish feeling to it.”

“I thought Nidavellir would be underground. With claustrophobic tunnels and—”

“Kid, that’s a cavern ceiling above your head. It’s just a long way up and hidden by air pollution. We don’t have daytime here. It’s this dark all the time.”

I stared into the murky clouds. After being in Freya’s realm, the world of the dwarves seemed oppressive, but it also seemed more familiar, more...genuine. I guess no true Bostonian would trust a place that was sunny and pleasant all the time. But a gritty, perpetually cold and gloomy

neighborhood? Throw in a couple of Dunkin' Donuts locations, and I'm right at home.

Blitz wrapped his pith helmet in its dark netting. The whole thing collapsed into a small black handkerchief, which he tucked into his coat pocket. "We should get going."

"We're not going to talk about what happened up there in Volkswagen?"

"What's there to say?"

"For one thing, we're cousins."

Blitz shrugged. "I'm happy to be your cousin, kid, but children of the gods don't put much stock in that sort of connection. Godly family lines are so tangled—thinking about it will drive you crazy. Everybody's related to everybody."

"But you're a demigod," I said. "That's a good thing, right?"

"I hate the word *demigod*. I prefer *born with a target on my back*."

"Come on, Blitz. Freya is your mom. That's important information you kinda forgot to mention."

"Freya is my mother," he agreed. "A lot of svartalfs are descended from Freya. Down here, it's not such a big deal. She mentioned how she got Brisingamen? A few millennia ago she was strolling through Nidavellir—who knows why—and she came across these four dwarves who were crafting the necklace. She was obsessed. She had to have it. The dwarves said sure, for the right price. Freya had to marry each of them, one after the other, for one day each."

"She..." I wanted to say, *Gross, she married four dwarves?* Then I remembered who was telling the story. "Oh."

"Yeah." Blitz sounded miserable. "She had four dwarvish children, one for each marriage."

I frowned. "Wait. If she was married for one day to each dwarf and a pregnancy lasts...the math doesn't work out on that."

"Don't ask me. Goddesses live by their own rules. Anyway, she got the necklace. She was ashamed of herself for marrying dwarves. Tried to keep it a secret. But the thing is, she *loved* dwarven jewelry. She kept coming back to Nidavellir to pick out new pieces, and every time..."

"Wow."

Blitzen's shoulders slumped. "That's the main difference between dark elves and regular dwarves. The svartalfs are taller and generally more handsome because we have Vanir blood. We're descended from Freya. You

say I'm a demigod. I say I'm a receipt. My dad crafted a pair of earrings for Freya. She married him for a day. She couldn't resist his craftsmanship. He couldn't resist her beauty. Now she sends me to purchase a new pair of earrings because she's tired of the old ones and Asgard forbid she find herself saddled with another little Blitzen."

The bitterness in his voice could've melted iron plating. I wanted to tell him I understood how he felt, but I wasn't sure I did. Even if I never knew my dad, I'd had my mom. That had always been enough for me. For Blitzen...not so much. I wasn't sure what had happened to his father, but I remembered what he'd told me at the Esplanade lagoon: *You're not the only one who's lost family to the wolves, kid.*

"Come on," he told me. "If we stand in the street any longer, we'll get mugged for this bag of tears. Dwarves can smell red gold a mile away." He pointed to the bar on the corner. "I'll buy you a drink at Nabbi's Tavern."

Nabbi's restored my faith in dwarves, because it was in fact a claustrophobic tunnel. The ceiling was a low-clearance hazard. The walls were papered with old fight posters like DONNER THE DESTROYER VS. MINI-MURDER, ONE NIGHT ONLY! featuring pictures of muscular snarling dwarves in wrestling masks.

Mismatched tables and chairs were occupied by a dozen mismatched dwarves—some svartalfs like Blitzen who could easily have passed for human, some much shorter guys who could have easily passed for garden gnomes. A few of the patrons glanced at us, but nobody seemed shocked that I was a human...if they even realized. The idea that I could pass for a dwarf was pretty disturbing.

The most unreal thing about the bar was Taylor Swift's "Blank Space" blasting from the speakers.

"Dwarves like human music?" I asked Blitzen.

"You mean humans like *our* music."

"But..." I had a sudden image of Taylor Swift's mom and Freya having a girls' night out in Nidavellir. "Never mind."

As we made our way toward the bar, I realized that the furniture wasn't just mismatched. Every single table and chair was unique—apparently handcrafted from various metals, with different designs and upholstery. One table was shaped like a bronze wagon wheel with a glass top. Another had a

tin and brass chessboard hammered into the surface. Some chairs had wheels. Others had adjustable booster seats. Some had massage controls or propellers on the back.

Over by the left wall, three dwarves were playing darts. The board's rings rotated and blew steam. One dwarf tossed his dart, which buzzed toward the target like a tiny drone. While it was still in flight, another dwarf took a shot. His dart rocketed toward the drone dart and exploded, knocking it out of the air.

The first dwarf just grunted. "Nice shot."

Finally we reached the polished oak bar, where Nabbi himself was waiting. I could tell who he was because of my highly trained deductive mind, and also because his stained yellow apron read HI! I'M NABBI.

I thought he was the tallest dwarf I'd met so far until I realized he was standing on a catwalk behind the counter. Nabbi was actually only two feet tall, including the shock of black hair that stuck up from his scalp like a sea urchin. His cleanshaven face made me appreciate why dwarves wear beards. Without one, Nabbi was gods-awful ugly. He had no chin to speak of. His mouth puckered sourly.

He scowled at us like we'd tracked in mud.

"Greetings, Blitzen, son of Freya," he said. "No explosions in my bar this time, I hope?"

Blitzen bowed. "Greetings, Nabbi, son of Loretta. To be fair, I wasn't the one who brought the grenades. Also, this is my friend Magnus, son of —"

"Um. Son of Natalie."

Nabbi nodded to me. His busy eyebrows were fascinating. They seemed to move like live caterpillars.

I reached for a bar stool, but Blitzen stopped me.

"Nabbi," he said formally, "may my friend use this stool? What is its name and history?"

"That stool is Rear-Rester," said Nabbi. "Crafted by Gonda. Once it held the tush of the master smith Alviss. Use it in comfort, Magnus, son of Natalie. And Blitzen, you may sit on Keister-Home, famed among stools, made by yours truly. It survived the Great Bar Fight of 4109 A.M.!"

"My thanks." Blitzen climbed on his stool, which was polished oak with a velvet-padded seat. "A fine Keister-Home it is!"

Nabbi looked at me expectantly. I tried my stool, which was hard steel with no cushion. It wasn't much of a Rear-Rester. It was more of a Magnus Mangler, but I tried for a smile. "Yep, that's a nice stool all right!"

Blitzen rapped his knuckles on the bar. "Mead for me, Nabbi. And for my friend—"

"Uh, soda or something?" I wasn't sure I wanted to be walking around Dwarven Southie with a mead buzz.

Nabbi filled two mugs and set them in front of us. Blitzen's goblet was gold on the inside, silver on the outside, decorated with images of dancing dwarf women.

"That cup is Golden Bowl," said Nabbi. "Made by my father, Darbi. And this one"—he nudged my pewter tankard—"is Boom Daddy, made by yours truly. Always ask for a refill before you reach the bottom of the cup. Otherwise"—he splayed his fingers—"boom, Daddy!"

I really hoped he was kidding, but I decided to take small sips.

Blitz drank his mead. "Mmm. A fine cup for quaffing! And now that we are past the formalities, Nabbi...we need to speak with Junior."

A vein throbbed in Nabbi's left temple. "Do you have a death wish?"

Blitz reached into his pouch. He slid a single gold tear across the counter. "This one is for you," he said in a low voice. "Just for making the call. Tell Junior we have more. All we want is a chance to barter."

After my experience with Ran, the word *barter* made me even more uncomfortable than Rear-Rester. Nabbi looked back and forth between Blitzen and the tear, his expression vacillating between apprehension and greed. Finally the greed won. The barkeep snatched the drop of gold.

"I'll make the call. Enjoy your drinks." He climbed off his catwalk and disappeared into the kitchen.

I turned to Blitz. "A few questions."

He chuckled. "Only a few?"

"What does 4109 A.M. mean? Is it the time, or—"

"Dwarves count years from the creation of our species," Blitz said.  
"A.M. is *After Maggots*."

I decided my ears must still be defective from Ratatosk's barking. "Say what?"

"The creation of the world...Come on, you know the story. The gods killed the largest of the giants, Ymir, and used his flesh to create Midgard. Nidavellir developed *under* Midgard, where maggots ate into the giant's

dead flesh and created tunnels. Some of those maggots evolved, with a little help from the gods, into dwarves.”

Blitzen looked proud of this historical tidbit. I decided to do my best to erase it from my long-term memory.

“Different question,” I said. “Why does my goblet have a name?”

“Dwarves are craftsmen,” said Blitzen. “We’re serious about the things we make. You humans—you make a thousand crappy chairs that all look alike and all break within a year. When we make a chair, we make one chair to last a lifetime, a chair unlike any other in the world. Cups, furniture, weapons...every crafted item has a soul and a name. You can’t appreciate something unless it’s good enough for a name.”

I studied my tankard, which was painstakingly engraved with runes and wave designs. I wished it had a different name—like *No Way Will I Explode*—but I had to admit it was a nice cup.

“And calling Nabby son of Loretta?” I asked. “Or me the son of Natalie?”

“Dwarves are matriarchal. We trace our lineage through our mothers. Again, it makes much more sense than your patrilineal way. After all, one can only be born from a single biological mother. Unless you are the god Heimdall. He had nine biological mothers. But that’s another story.”

Synapses melted in my brain. “Let’s move along. Freya’s tears...red gold? Sam told me that’s the currency of Asgard.”

“Yes. But Freya’s tears are one hundred percent pure. The finest red gold in creation. For the pouch of tears we’re carrying, most dwarves would give their right eyeballs.”

“So this guy Junior—he’ll bargain with us?”

“Either that,” Blitz said, “or he’ll chop us into small pieces. You want some nachos while we wait?”



## Blitz Makes a Bad Deal

I HAD TO HAND IT TO NABBI. He served good near-death nachos.

I was halfway through my plate of guacamole-enhanced tastiness when Junior showed up. On first sight, I wondered if it would be faster just to drain Boom Daddy and go boom, because I didn't like our chances of bartering with the old dwarf.

Junior looked about two hundred years old. Scraps of gray hair clung to his liver-spotted head. His beard gave *scraggly* a bad name. His malicious brown eyes flitted around the bar as if he were thinking, *I hate that. I hate that. And I really hate that.* He wasn't physically intimidating, shuffling along with his gold-plated walker, but he was flanked by a pair of dwarven bodyguards, each so burly that they could've been used as NFL tackle dummies.

The other customers got up and quietly left, like in a scene from an old Western. Blitzen and I both stood.

"Junior." Blitz bowed. "Thank you for meeting with us."

"Some nerve," Junior snarled.

"Would you like my seat?" Blitzen offered. "It is Keister-Home, made by—"

"No, thanks," Junior said. "I'll stand, compliments of my walker, Granny Shuffler, famous among geriatric products, made by Nurse Bambi,

my private assistant.”

I bit the inside of my cheek. I doubted that laughing would be good diplomacy.

“This is Magnus, son of Natalie,” Blitzen said.

The old dwarf glared at me. “I know who he is. Found the Sword of Summer. You couldn’t wait until after I died? I’m too old for this Ragnarok nonsense.”

“My bad,” I said. “I should have checked with you before I got attacked by Surt and sent to Valhalla.”

Blitzen coughed. The bodyguards appraised me like I might have just made their day more interesting.

Junior cackled. “I like you. You’re rude. Let’s see this blade, then.”

I showed him my magic pendant trick. In the dim neon lights of the barroom, the blade’s runes glowed orange and green.

The old dwarf sucked his teeth. “That’s Frey’s blade, all right. Bad news.”

“Then, perhaps,” Blitzen said, “you’ll be willing to help us?”

“*Help you?*” Junior wheezed. “Your father was my nemesis! You besmirched my reputation. And you want my help. You’ve got iron guts, Blitzen, I’ll give you that.”

The tendons in Blitz’s neck looked like they might bust his well-starched collar. “This isn’t about our family feud, Junior. This is about the rope. It’s about securing Fenris Wolf.”

“Oh, of course it is.” Junior sneered at his bodyguards. “The fact that *my father*, Eitri Senior, was the only dwarf talented enough to *make* Gleipnir, and your father, Bili, spent his life questioning the quality of the rope—that has nothing to do with it!”

Blitzen clenched his pouch of red gold tears. I was afraid he might smack Junior upside the head with it. “The Sword of Summer is right here. In just six Midgardian nights, Surt is planning to free the Wolf. We’re going to do our best to stop him, but you *know* the rope Gleipnir is beyond its expiration date. We need information about the Wolf’s bindings. More importantly, we need a replacement rope just in case. Only you have the talent to make one.”

Junior cupped his ear. “Say that last part again.”

“You’re talented, you crusty old—” Blitzen stopped. “Only you have the skill to make a new rope.”

“True.” Junior smirked. “It so happens I *have* a replacement rope already made. Not because of any problems with Gleipnir, mind you, or because of any of your family’s scandalous accusations about its quality—just because I like to be prepared. Unlike *your* father, I might add, going off alone to check on Fenris Wolf like an idiot and getting himself killed.”

I had to step in front of Blitzen to keep him from attacking the old dwarf.

“Okay, then!” I said. “Guys, this isn’t the time. Junior, if you’ve got a new rope, that’s great. Let’s talk price. And, um, we’ll also need a nice set of earrings.”

“Heh.” Junior wiped his mouth. “Of course you will. For Blitzen’s mother, no doubt. What are you offering in payment?”

“Blitzen,” I said, “show him.”

Blitz’s eyes still danced with rage, but he opened the pouch and spilled some red gold tears into his palm.

“Huh,” said Junior. “An acceptable price...or it *would* be, if it wasn’t from Blitzen. I’ll sell you what you want for that pouch of tears, but first my family’s honor must be satisfied. It’s high time we settled this feud. What do you say, son of Freya? A contest—you and me. The traditional rules, the traditional wager.”

Blitzen backed into the bar. He squirmed so badly I could almost believe he had evolved from maggots. (ERASE. *Bad*, long-term memory. ERASE!)

“Junior,” he said, “you know I don’t—I couldn’t possibly—”

“Shall we say tomorrow at mossglow?” Junior asked. “The panel of judges can be headed by a neutral party—perhaps Nabbi, who I’m sure is not eavesdropping behind the bar right now.”

Something banged against the catwalk. From below the counter, Nabbi’s muffled voice said, “I would be honored.”

“There you are, then!” Junior smiled. “Well, Blitzen? I have challenged you according to our ancient customs. Will you defend the honor of your family?”

“I...” Blitzen hung his head. “Where should we meet?”

“The forges in Kenning Square,” Junior said. “Oh, this will be amusing. Come on, boys. I have to tell Nurse Bambi about it!”

The old dwarf shuffled out with his bodyguards in tow. As soon as they were gone, Blitzen collapsed on Keister-Home and drained Golden Bowl.

Nabbi emerged from behind the counter. His caterpillar eyebrows wriggled with concern as he refilled Blitz's goblet. "This one's on the house, Blitzen. It's been nice knowing you."

He went back to the kitchen, leaving Blitz and me alone with Taylor Swift singing "I Know Places." The lyrics took on a whole new meaning in a subterranean dwarf world.

"Are you going to explain what just happened?" I asked Blitz. "What is this contest at mossglow? Also, what is mossglow?"

"Moss glow..." Blitzen stared into his cup. "Dwarf version of dawn, when the moss begins to glow. As for the contest..." He swallowed back a sob. "It's nothing. I'm sure you'll be able to continue the quest without me."

Just then the barroom doors burst open. Sam and Hearthstone tumbled inside like they'd been pushed from a moving car.

"They're alive!" I jumped up. "Blitz, look!"

Hearthstone was so excited he couldn't even sign. He rushed over and almost tackled Blitzen off his stool.

"Hey, buddy." Blitz patted his back absently. "Yeah, I'm glad to see you, too."

Sam didn't hug me, but she managed a smile. She was scratched up and covered with leaves and twigs, but she didn't look badly hurt. "Magnus, glad you haven't died yet. I want to be there for that."

"Thanks, al-Abbas. What happened to you guys?"

She shrugged. "We hid under the hijab as long as we could."

With all the other stuff going on, I'd forgotten about the scarf. "Yeah, what was that about? You've got an invisibility hijab?"

"It doesn't make me invisible. It's just camouflage. All Valkyries are given swan cloaks to help us hide when necessary. I just made mine a hijab."

"But you weren't a swan. You were tree moss."

"It can do different things. Anyway, we waited until the squirrel left. The barking left me in bad shape, but, thankfully, Hearth wasn't affected. We climbed Yggdrasil for a while—"

*A moose tried to eat us,* Hearth signed.

"Excuse me?" I asked. "A moose?"

Hearth grunted in exasperation. He spelled out: *D-E-E-R. Same sign for both animals.*

“Oh, that’s much better,” I said. “A deer tried to eat you.”

“Yes,” Sam agreed. “Dvalinn or maybe Duneyrr—one of the stags that roam the World Tree. We got away, took a wrong turn into Alfheim...”

Hearthstone shuddered, then simply signed, *Hate*.

“And here we are.” Sam eyed Blitzen, whose expression was still blank with shock. “So...what’s going on?”

I told them about our visit with Freya, then our conversation with Junior. Hearthstone steadied himself on the bar. He spelled with one hand: *M-a-k-i-n-g?* Then he shook his head vehemently.

“What do you mean, *making*?” I asked.

“A *making*,” Blitz muttered into his goblet, “is the dwarven contest. It tests our crafting skills.”

Sam tapped her fingers on her ax. “Judging from your expression, I’m guessing you don’t trust your skills.”

“I am rubbish at crafting,” Blitzen said.

*Not true*, Hearth protested.

“Hearthstone,” Blitzen said, “even if I was *excellent* at crafting, Junior is the most skilled dwarf alive. He’ll destroy me.”

“Come on,” I said. “You’ll do fine. And if you lose, we’ll find another way to get that rope.”

Blitzen looked at me mournfully. “It’s worse than that, kid. If I lose, I pay the traditional price: my head.”



## We Have a Pre-decapitation Party, with Egg Rolls

CRASHING AT BLITZEN'S apartment was the high point of our trip. Not that that was saying much.

Blitz rented the third floor of a row house across the street from Svartalf Mart (yes, that's a real thing). Considering the fact that he was due to be decapitated the next day, he was a good host. He apologized for not cleaning up (though the place looked spotless to me), microwaved some egg rolls, and brought out a liter of Diet Sergeant Pepper and a six-pack of Fjalar's Foaming Mead, each bottle uniquely handcrafted in a different color of glass.

His furniture was spare but stylish: an L-shaped sofa and two space-age armchairs. They probably had names and were famous among living-room furniture, but Blitzen didn't introduce them. Neatly arranged on the coffee table was a spread of dwarf men's fashion and interior design magazines.

While Sam and Hearth sat with Blitz, trying to console him, I paced the room. I felt angry and guilty that I'd put Blitzen in such a tight spot. He'd already risked enough for me. He'd spent two years on the streets watching out for me when he could've been here, kicking back with egg rolls and foaming mead. He'd tried to protect me by attacking the lord of the fire

giants with a toy sign. Now he was going to lose his head in a craft-off with an evil senior citizen.

Also...the dwarven philosophy of crafting had unsettled me. In Midgard, most things were breakable, replaceable junk. I'd *lived* off that junk for the last two years—picking through what people discarded, finding bits I could use or sell or at least make a fire with.

I wondered what it would be like living in Nidavellir, where every item was crafted to be a lifetime work of art—right down to your cup or your chair. It might get annoying to have to recite the deeds of your shoes before you put them on in the morning, but at least you'd know they were amazing shoes.

I wondered about the Sword of Summer. Freya had told me to befriend it. She'd implied that the weapon had thoughts and feelings.

*Every crafted item has a soul,* Blitz had told me.

Maybe I hadn't properly introduced myself. Maybe I needed to treat the sword like another companion....

"Blitz, you must have a specialty," Samirah was saying. "What did you study in trade school?"

"Fashion." Blitzen sniffled. "I designed my own degree program. But clothing isn't a recognized craft. They'll expect me to hammer molten ingots or tinker with machinery! I'm no good at that!"

*You are,* Hearth signed.

"Not under pressure," Blitz said.

"I don't get it," I said. "Why does the loser have to die? How do they decide the winner?"

Blitzen stared at the cover of *Dwarf Quarterly—New Looks for Spring!* *100 Uses for Warg Leather!* "Each contestant makes three items. They can be anything. At the end of the day, the judges rate each item according to its usefulness, beauty, quality, whatever. They can assign points any way they wish. The contestant with the most overall points wins. The other guy dies."

"You must not have a lot of competitions," I said, "if the loser always gets decapitated."

"That's the traditional wager," Blitz said. "Most people don't insist on it anymore. Junior is old-fashioned. Also, he hates me."

"Something about Fenris Wolf and your dad?"

Hearth shook his head to shut me up, but Blitzen patted his knee. "It's okay, buddy. They deserve to know."

Blitz leaned back on the sofa. He seemed suddenly calmer about his impending doom, which I found unsettling. I kind of wanted him to be punching walls.

“I told you dwarven items are made for life?” he said. “Well...*lifetime* for a dwarf can mean hundreds of years.”

I studied Blitz’s beard, wondering if he dyed out the gray whiskers.  
“How old are you?”

“Twenty,” Blitz said. “But Junior...he’s going on five hundred. His dad, Eitri, was one of the most famous craftsmen in dwarven history. He lived over a thousand years, made some of the gods’ most important items.”

Samirah nibbled on an egg roll. “Even *I’ve* heard of him. He’s in the old stories. He made Thor’s hammer.”

Blitz nodded. “Anyway, the rope Gleipnir...you could argue it was his most important work, even more than Thor’s hammer. The rope keeps Fenris Wolf from getting free and starting Doomsday.”

“I’m with you so far,” I said.

“The thing is—the rope was a rush job. The gods were clamoring for help. They’d already tried to bind Fenris with two massive chains. They knew their window of opportunity was closing. The Wolf was getting stronger and wilder by the day. Pretty soon he’d be uncontrollable. So Eitri...well, he did his best. Obviously, the rope has held together this long. But a thousand years is a long time, even for a dwarven rope, especially when the strongest wolf in the universe is straining against it day and night. My dad, Bili, was a great rope maker. He spent years trying to convince Junior that Gleipnir needed to be replaced. Junior wouldn’t hear of it. Junior said he went to the Wolf’s island from time to time to inspect the rope, and he swore that Gleipnir was fine. He thought my dad was just insulting his family’s reputation. Finally my dad...”

Blitz’s voice cracked.

Hearthstone signed, *You don’t have to tell.*

“I’m okay.” Blitzen cleared his throat. “Junior used all his influence to turn people against my dad. Our family lost business. Nobody would buy Bili’s crafts. Finally Dad went to the island of Lyngvi himself. He wanted to check the rope, prove that it needed replacing. He never came back. Months later a dwarf patrol found...” He looked down and shook his head.

Hearthstone signed: *Clothes. Ripped. Washed up on shore.*

Either Samirah was catching on to sign language or she got the general idea. She put her fingertips to her mouth. “Blitz, I’m so sorry.”

“Well”—he shrugged listlessly—“now you know. Junior is still holding a grudge. My dad’s death wasn’t enough. He wants to shame and kill *me*, too.”

I set my drink on the coffee table. “Blitz, I think I speak for all of us when I say that Junior can shove his Granny Shuffler—”

“Magnus...” Sam warned.

“What? That old dwarf needs to be decapitated in the worst way. What can we do to help Blitz win the contest?”

“I appreciate it, kid.” Blitz struggled to his feet. “But there’s nothing. I...if you’ll excuse me...”

He staggered to his bedroom and shut the door behind him.

Samirah pursed her lips. She still had a twig of Yggdrasil sticking out of her coat pocket. “Is there any chance Junior isn’t *that* good? He’s very old now, isn’t he?”

Hearthstone unwrapped his scarf and threw it on the couch. He wasn’t doing well in the darkness of Nidavellir. The green veins on his neck stood out more than usual. His hair floated with static, like plant tendrils searching for sunlight.

*Junior is very good.* He made a sign like ripping a piece of paper in half and throwing away the pieces: *Hopeless*.

I felt like throwing bottles of Fjalar’s Foaming Mead out the window. “But Blitz *can* craft, right? Or were you just being encouraging?”

Hearth rose. He walked to a sideboard along the dining room wall. I hadn’t paid the table much attention, but Hearth pressed something on its surface—a hidden switch, I guess—and the tabletop opened like a clamshell. The underside of the top section was one big light panel. It flickered to life, glowing warm and golden.

“A tanning bed.” As soon as I said that, the truth sank in. “When you first came to Nidavellir, Blitzen saved your life. That’s how. He made a way for you to get sunlight.”

Hearth nodded. *First time I used runes for magic. Mistake. I dropped into Nidavellir. Almost died. Blitzen—he can craft. Kind and smart. But no good under pressure. Contests...no.*

Sam hugged her knees. “So what do we do? Do you have any magic that will help?”

Hearth hesitated. *Some. Will use before contest. Not enough.*

I translated for Sam and then asked, “What can I do?”

*Protect him, Hearth signed. Junior will try to s-a-b-o-t-a-g-e.*

“Sabotage?” I frowned. “Isn’t that cheating?”

“I’ve heard about this,” Sam said. “In dwarven contests, you can mess with your competitor as long as you aren’t caught. The interference has to look like an accident, or at least something the judges can’t trace back to you. But it sounds like Junior doesn’t need to cheat to win.”

*He will cheat.* Hearth made a sign like a hook swinging into a latch.  
*Spite.*

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll keep Blitz safe.”

*Still not enough.* Hearth peered at Sam. *Only way to win—mess with Junior.*

When I told Sam what he’d signed, she turned as gray as a dwarf in sunlight. “No.” She wagged her finger at Hearth. “No, absolutely not. I *told you.*”

*Blitz will die,* Hearth signed. *You did it before.*

“What’s he talking about?” I asked. “What did you do before?”

She got to her feet. The tension in the room was suddenly at DEFCON Two. “Hearthstone, you said you wouldn’t mention it. You promised.” She faced me, her expression shutting down any further questions. “Excuse me. I need some air.”

She stormed out of the apartment.

I stared at Hearthstone. “What was that?”

His shoulders slumped. His face was empty, drained of hope. He signed, *A mistake.* Then he climbed onto his sun bed and turned toward the light, his body casting a wolf-shaped shadow across the floor.



## Let the Crafting of Decorative Metal Waterfowl Begin

KENNING SQUARE looked like a basketball court without the baskets. A chain-link fence bordered a stretch of cracked asphalt. Along one side stood a row of stone pillars carved like totem poles with dragon heads, centipedes, and troll faces. Along the other side, bleachers were packed with dwarf spectators. On the court, where the free-throw lines would've been, two open-air blacksmith shops were ready for action. Each had a forge with bellows to stoke the fire, an assortment of anvils, a few sturdy tables, and racks of tools that looked like torture equipment.

The crowd seemed prepared for a long day. They'd brought coolers, blankets, and picnic baskets. A few enterprising dwarves had parked their food trucks nearby. The sign for IRI'S HANDCRAFTED CONFECTIONS showed a waffle cone topped with a three-story ice-cream palace. BUMBURR'S BREAKFAST BURRITOS had a line twenty dwarves long, which made me sorry I'd eaten stale doughnuts at Blitz's place.

As we approached the court, the crowd gave Blitzen a smattering of applause. Sam was nowhere to be seen. She'd never come back to the apartment the previous night. I wasn't sure whether to be worried or angry.

Junior was waiting, leaning on his gold-plated walker. His two bodyguards stood behind him, dressed like their boss in overalls and leather

gauntlets.

“Well, well, Blitzen.” The old dwarf sneered. “Moss glow started ten minutes ago. Were you getting your beauty sleep?”

Blitzen looked like he hadn’t slept at all. His eyes were sunken and bloodshot. He’d spent the past hour worrying about what to wear, finally deciding on gray slacks, a white dress shirt with black suspenders, pointy black shoes, and a porkpie hat. He might not win for his crafting, but he would definitely get the vote for best-dressed blacksmith.

He glanced around distractedly. “Get started?”

The crowd cheered. Hearthstone accompanied Blitzen to the forge. After a night on Blitzen’s tanning bed, the elf’s face had a rosy sheen as if he’d been infused with paprika. Before we left the apartment, he’d cast a rune on Blitz to help him feel rested and focused, which had left Hearth exhausted and unfocused. Nevertheless, Hearth stoked the forge while Blitzen puttered around his workstation, staring in confusion at the racks of tools and baskets of metal ore.

Meanwhile Junior scooted around on his walker, barking at one of his bodyguards to fetch him a lump of iron and a sack of bone chips. The other bodyguard stood watch, scanning for anything that might disrupt his boss’s work.

I tried to do the same for Blitz, but I doubted I looked as intimidating as a muscular dwarf in overalls. (And, yes, that was depressing.)

After about an hour, my initial adrenaline rush wore off. I began to realize why the spectators had brought picnic lunches. Crafting was not a fast-moving sport. Every once in a while the crowd would clap or murmur approvingly when Junior struck a good hit with his hammer, or plunged a piece of metal into the cooling vat with a satisfying hiss. Nabbi and two other judges paced back and forth between the workstations, scribbling notes on their clipboards. But for me, most of the morning was spent with the Sword of Summer in my hand, trying not to look like a fool.

A couple of times I had to do my job. Once a dart shot out of nowhere, heading for Blitzen. The Sword of Summer leaped into action. Before I even knew what was happening, the blade sliced the dart out of the air. The crowd applauded, which would have been gratifying if I’d actually done anything.

A little later, a random dwarf charged me from the sidelines, swinging an ax and screaming, “BLOOD!” I hit him in the head with the hilt of my

sword. He collapsed. More polite applause. A couple of bystanders hauled the dwarf away by his ankles.

Junior was busy hammering out a red-hot iron cylinder the size of a shotgun barrel. He'd already crafted a dozen smaller mechanisms that I guessed would fit together with the cylinder, but I couldn't tell what the final product was supposed to be. The old dwarf's walker didn't slow him down at all. He had some trouble shuffling around, but he could stand in one place just fine. Despite his age, his arm muscles were ripped from a lifetime swinging hammers at anvils.

Meanwhile, Blitzen hunched over his worktable with a pair of needle-nose pliers, connecting thin sheets of curved metal into some kind of figurine. Hearthstone stood nearby, drenched with sweat from working the bellows.

I tried not to worry about how exhausted Hearth looked, or where Sam was, or how many times Blitzen dropped his tools and wept over his project.

Finally Nabbi yelled, "Ten minutes until mid-morning break!"

Blitzen sobbed. He attached another sheet of metal to his project, which was starting to resemble a duck.

Most of the crowd focused on the other workstation, where Junior was attaching various mechanisms to the cylinder. He hobbled to the forge and reheated the whole contraption until it was glowing red.

Carefully, he set the cylinder against the anvil, holding it steady with his tongs. He raised his hammer.

Just as he struck, something went wrong. Junior screamed. The hammer went askew, flattening the cylinder and sending attachments flying everywhere. Junior staggered backward, his hands cupped over his face.

His bodyguards rushed to his aid, crying, "What? What it is?"

I couldn't hear the whole conversation, but apparently some kind of insect had bitten Junior between the eyes.

"Did you get it?" asked one of the guards.

"No! The little pest flew off! Quick, before the cylinder cools—"

"Time!" shouted Nabbi.

Junior stomped his foot and cursed. He glared at his ruined project and yelled at his bodyguards.

I went to check on Blitzen, who sat slumped on his anvil. His porkpie hat was pushed back on his head. His left suspender had snapped.

“How you doing, champ?” I asked.

“Horrible.” He gestured at his project. “I made a duck.”

“Yeah...” I searched for a compliment. “It’s a really nice duck. That’s the bill, right? And those are the wings?”

Hearthstone sat next to us on the asphalt. *Ducks*, he signed. *Always ducks.*

“I’m sorry,” Blitz moaned. “When I’m stressed, I default to waterfowl. I don’t know why.”

“No worries,” I said. “Junior had a setback. His first project is pretty much ruined.”

Blitz tried to brush the cinders off his white shirt. “It doesn’t matter. Junior’s first item is always his warm-up. He’s got two more chances to destroy me.”

“Hey, none of that.” I rummaged through our supply bag and handed out canteens of water and some peanut butter crackers.

Hearthstone ate like a starving elf. Then he sat back and shone a flashlight on his face, trying to absorb the rays. Blitzen barely sipped his water.

“I never wanted this,” Blitz murmured. “Crafting contests, magic items. All I ever wanted was to design quality clothing and sell it at reasonable prices in my own store.”

I stared at his sweat-stained collar and thought about what Freya had said: *Blitzen is a genius at fabrics and fashion. The other dwarves don’t appreciate his expertise, but I think it’s marvelous.*

“That’s your dream,” I realized. “That’s why you drank from Mimir’s Well—to find out how to open a clothing shop?”

Blitzen scowled. “It was more than that. I wanted to follow my dream. I wanted other dwarves to stop laughing at me. I wanted to avenge my father’s death and restore the family’s honor! But those things didn’t go together. I went to Mimir for advice.”

“And...what did he say?”

Blitzen shrugged helplessly. “Four years of service—that was the price for drinking from his well. He said the cost of knowledge was also the answer. By serving him, I would get what I wanted. Except I didn’t. Now I’m going to die.”

No, Hearth signed. *Someday you will get your dream.*

“How, exactly?” Blitzen asked. “It’s a little hard to cut and sew fabric when you’re decapitated.”

“That’s not going to happen,” I said.

In my chest, several ideas started to smelt together into a usable molten ingot—unless that sensation was just the peanut butter crackers. I thought about my sword that could turn into a pendant, and Sam’s hijab that was magical high-tech camouflage. “Blitz, your next two items are going to be awesome.”

“How do you know? I might panic and make more ducks!”

“You want to make clothing, right? So make clothing.”

“Kid, this is a *forge*, not a haberdashery. Besides, fashion is not a recognized craft.”

“What about armor?”

Blitz hesitated. “Well, yeah, but—”

“What about fashionable clothing that doubles as armor?”

Blitz’s mouth fell open. “Balder’s Bling...Kid, you may be on to something!” He shot to his feet and began hurrying around the workspace, gathering tools.

Hearth beamed at me—literally, since he still had the flashlight aimed at his face. He tapped his free hand to his head—the sign for *genius*.

When Nabbi called time, I took over at the bellows to give Hearth a rest. He stood guard. Stoking the fire was about as fun as riding a stationary bike inside a baking oven.

After a while, Blitzen took me off the bellows and had me assist with the crafting. I was hopeless at it, but being forced to give me directions seemed to increase Blitz’s confidence. “No, put that here. No, the big tongs! Hold it steady, kid! That’s not steady!”

I lost track of time. I didn’t pay much attention to what Blitz was making—something small, woven from chain. Instead I kept thinking about the Sword of Summer, now back in pendant form around my neck.

I remembered walking from the docks to Copley Square, half delirious with hunger and exhaustion, and the imaginary conversation I’d had with the blade. I considered how the sword either hummed or stayed silent, either guided my hand or lay heavy and inert. If it had a soul and emotions —then I hadn’t given it enough credit. I’d been treating it like a dangerous object. I should be treating it like a person.

“Thanks,” I said under my breath, trying not to feel ridiculous. “When you cut that dart out of the air earlier, you saved my friend. I should’ve thanked you sooner.”

The pendant seemed to grow warmer, though standing next to the forge, it was hard to be sure.

“Sumarbrander,” I said. “Is that what you like to be called? Sorry I’ve been ignoring you.”

*Hmmm*, the pendant hummed skeptically.

“You’re much more than a sword,” I said. “You’re not just for slashing at things. You—”

From across the courtyard, Nabbi yelled, “Ten minutes until lunch break!”

“Oh, gods,” Blitzen muttered. “I can’t—Kid, quick! Hand me that texturing hammer.”

His hands flew, snatching up various tools, making minor adjustments to his creation. It didn’t look like much—just a flat narrow length of chain mail—but Blitz worked as if his life depended on it, which it did.

He folded and crimped the chain mail into its final shape, then soldered the seam.

“It’s a necktie!” I realized. “Blitzen, I actually recognize what you made!”

“Thank you. Shut up.” He raised his soldering gun and announced, “Done!” just as a crash reverberated from Junior’s workstation.

“GAAHHH!” screamed the old dwarf.

The entire crowd surged to their feet.

Junior was on his butt, cradling his face in his hands. On his worktable sat a flattened, misshapen lump of cooling iron.

His bodyguards rushed to help him.

“Damnable insect!” Junior howled. He was bleeding from the bridge of his nose. He looked at his palms but apparently found no squashed bug. “I hit it this time, I’m sure! Where is it?”

Nabbi and the other judges frowned in our direction, as if we somehow might have orchestrated a kamikaze insect attack. I guess we looked clueless enough to convince them otherwise.

“Time for lunch,” Nabbi announced. “One more item shall be made this afternoon!”

We ate quickly, because Blitz was raring to get back to work.

“I’ve got the hang of it now,” he said. “I’ve *got* it. Kid, I owe you big-time.”

I glanced over at Junior’s workstation. His bodyguards were glaring at me, cracking their knuckles.

“Let’s just get through the contest,” I said. “I wish Sam was here. We may need to fight our way out.”

Hearth gave me a curious look when I mentioned Sam.

“What?” I asked.

He shook his head and went back to eating his watercress sandwich.

The afternoon session went quickly. I was so busy on guard duty I barely had time to think. Junior must have hired some extra saboteurs, because every half hour or so I had to deal with a new threat: a spear thrown from the audience, a rotten apple aimed at Blitzen’s head, a steam-powered predator drone, and a pair of dwarves in green Spandex jumpsuits, wielding baseball bats. (The less said about that, the better.) Each time, the Sword of Summer guided my hand and neutralized the threat. Each time, I remembered to thank the sword.

I could almost discern its voice now: *Yeah, okay. Mmm-hmm. I suppose.* Like it was slowly warming up to me, getting over its resentment at being ignored.

Hearthstone rushed around the workstation, bringing Blitz extra materials and tools. Blitz was weaving a larger, more complicated piece of metal fabric. Whatever it was, he seemed pleased.

Finally, he set down his bezel roller and shouted, “Success!”

At the same moment, Junior suffered his most spectacular fail. His bodyguards had been standing close, ready for another kamikaze insect attack, but it made no difference. As Junior brought down his hammer for a masterstroke, a dark speck zipped out of the sky. The horsefly bit Junior on the face so hard he spun sideways under the momentum of his hammer. Wailing and staggering, he knocked both his guards unconscious, destroyed the contents of two worktables, and swept his third invention into the forge before he collapsed on the asphalt.

It shouldn’t have been funny—an old dwarf getting humiliated like that. Except that it was, kind of. Probably because that old dwarf was a spiteful, nasty piece of work.

In the midst of the commotion, Nabbi rang a hand bell. “The contest has ended!” he announced. “Time for judging the items...and killing the loser!”



## Junior Wins a Bag of Tears

SAM PICKED THAT MOMENT TO SHOW UP.

She shouldered through the crowd, her headscarf pulled low over her face. Her jacket was dusted with ash, as if she'd spent the night in a chimney.

I wanted to yell at her for being gone so long, but my anger evaporated when I noticed her black eye and swollen lip.

“What happened?” I asked. “Are you okay?”

“Little scuffle,” she said. “No worries. Let’s watch the judging.”

Spectators gathered around two tables on the sideline, where Junior's and Blitzen's crafts were on display. Blitzen stood with his hands clasped behind his back, looking confident despite his snapped suspenders, his grease-strained shirt, and his sweat-soaked porkpie hat.

Junior's face was a bloody mess. He could barely hold himself up on his walker. The murderous gleam in his eyes made him look like a serial killer exhausted after a hard day's work.

Nabbi and the other judges circled the tables, inspecting the crafted items and jotting notes on their clipboards.

At last Nabbi faced the audience. He arched his wriggly eyebrows and tried for a smile.

“Well, then!” he said. “Thank you all for attending this contest, sponsored by Nabbi’s Tavern, famous among taverns, built by Nabbi and home to Nabbi’s Stout, the only mead you’ll ever need. Now our contestants will tell us about their first items. Blitzen, son of Freya!”

Blitz gestured to his metal sculpture. “It’s a duck.”

Nabbi blinked. “And...what does it do?”

“When I press its back...” Blitzen did so. The duck swelled to three times its size, like a frightened pufferfish. “It turns into a larger duck.”

The second judge scratched his beard. “That’s it?”

“Well, yes,” Blitz said. “I call it the Expando-Duck. It’s perfect if you need a small metal duck. Or a larger metal duck.”

The third judge turned to his colleagues. “Garden knickknack, perhaps? Conversation piece? Decoy?”

Nabbi coughed. “Yes, thank you, Blitzen. And now you, Eitri Junior, son of Edna. What is your first creation?”

Junior wiped the blood out of his eyes. He held up his flattened iron cylinder, with several springs and latches dangling from it. “This is a self-guiding troll-seeking missile! If it were undamaged, it could destroy any troll at a distance of half a mile. And it’s reusable!”

The crowd murmured appreciatively.

“Um, but does it work?” asked the second judge.

“No!” Junior said. “It was ruined on the final hammer stroke. But if it *did* work—”

“But it doesn’t,” observed the third judge. “So what is it at the moment?”

“It’s a useless metal cylinder!” Junior snarled. “Which isn’t my fault!”

The judges conferred and scribbled some notes.

“So, in the first round,” Nabbi summed up, “we have an expandable duck versus a useless metal cylinder. Our contestants are running very close indeed. Blitzen, what is your second item?”

Blitzen proudly held up his chain mail neckware. “The bulletproof tie!”

The judges lowered their clipboards in perfect synchronicity.

“What?” asked Nabbi.

“Oh, come now!” Blitz turned to the audience. “How many of you have been in the embarrassing situation of wearing a bulletproof vest without a matching bulletproof tie?”

In the back of the crowd, one dwarf raised his hand.

“Exactly!” Blitzen said. “Not only is this accessory fashionable, but it will stop anything up to a 30-06 round. It can also be worn as a cravat.”

The judges frowned and took notes, but a few audience members seemed impressed. They examined their shirts, maybe thinking how underdressed they felt without a chain mail neckpiece.

“Junior?” asked Nabbi. “What is your second work of craftsmanship?”

“The Goblet of Infinity!” Junior gestured to a misshapen hunk of iron. “It holds a limitless amount of any liquid—great for road trips through waterless wastelands.”

“Uh...” Nabbi pointed with his pen. “It looks a bit crushed.”

“Stupid horsefly again!” Junior protested. “It bit me right between the eyes! Not *my* fault if an insect turned my brilliant invention into a slag heap.”

“Slag heap,” Nabbi repeated, jotting on his clipboard. “And Blitzen, your final item?”

Blitzen held up a glittering length of woven metal fabric. “The chain mail vest! For use with a three-piece suit of chain mail. Or, if you want to dress it down, you can wear it with jeans and a nice shirt.”

*And a shield,* Hearthstone offered.

“Yes, and a shield,” Blitzen said.

The third judge leaned forward, squinting. “I suppose it would offer some minor protection. If you were stabbed in the back at a disco, for instance.”

The second judge jotted something down. “Does it have any magic abilities?”

“Well, no,” Blitz said. “But it’s reversible: silver on the outside, gold on the inside. Depending on what jewelry you’re wearing, or what color armor —”

“I see.” Nabbi made a note on his clipboard and turned to Junior. “And your final item, sir?”

Junior’s fists trembled with rage. “This is unfair! I have never lost a contest. All of you know my skills. This meddler, this *poseur* Blitzen has somehow managed to ruin my—”

“Eitri Junior, son of Edna,” interrupted Nabbi, “what is your third item?”

He waved impatiently at the furnace. “My third item is in there! It doesn’t *matter* what it was, because it’s now boiling sludge!”

The judges circled up and conferred. The crowd shifted restlessly.

Nabbi faced the audience. "Judging has been difficult. We have weighed the merits of Junior's boiling sludge, slag heap, and useless metal cylinder against the chain mail vest, bulletproof tie, and Expando-Duck. It was a close call. However, we judge the winner of this contest to be Blitzen, son of Freya!"

Spectators applauded. Some gasped in disbelief. A female dwarf in a nurse's outfit, possibly Bambi, famous among dwarf nurses, passed out cold.

Hearthstone jumped up and down and made the ends of his scarf do the wave. I looked for Sam, but she was hanging back at the edges of the crowd.

Junior scowled at his fists as if deciding whether to hit himself. "Fine," he growled. "Take my head! I don't want to live in a world where Blitzen wins crafting contests!"

"Junior, I don't want to kill you," Blitzen said. Despite his win, he didn't sound proud or gloating. He looked tired, maybe even sad.

Junior blinked. "You—you don't?"

"No. Just give me the earrings and the rope as you promised. Oh, and a public admission that my father was right about Gleipnir all along. You should have replaced it centuries ago."

"Never!" Junior shrieked. "You impugn my father's reputation! I cannot \_\_\_"

"Okay, I'll get my ax," Blitzen said in a resigned tone. "I'm afraid the blade is a little dull...."

Junior gulped. He looked longingly at the bulletproof necktie. "Very well. Perhaps...perhaps Bilì had a point. The rope needed replacement."

"And you were wrong to tarnish his reputation."

The old dwarf's facial muscles convulsed, but he managed to get out the words. "And I was...wrong. Yes."

Blitzen gazed up into the gloom, whispering something under his breath. I wasn't a good lip-reader, but I was pretty sure he said, *I love you, Dad. Good-bye.*

He refocused on Junior. "Now, about the items you promised..."

Junior snapped his fingers. One of his bodyguards wobbled over, his head newly bandaged from his recent encounter with a hammer. He handed Blitzen a small velvet box.

“Earrings for your mother,” Junior said.

Blitz opened the box. Inside were two tiny cats made from gold filigree like Brisingamen. As I watched, the cats stretched, blinking their emerald eyes and flicking their diamond tails.

Blitz snapped the box shut. “Adequate. And the rope?”

The bodyguard tossed him a ball of silk kite string.

“You’re joking,” I said. “That’s supposed to bind Fenris Wolf?”

Junior glowered at me. “Boy, your ignorance is breathtaking. Gleipnir was just as thin and light, but its paradox ingredients gave it great strength. This rope is the same, only better!”

“Paradox ingredients?”

Blitz held up the end of the rope and whistled appreciatively. “He means things that aren’t supposed to exist. Paradox ingredients are very difficult to craft with, very dangerous. Gleipnir contained the footfall of a cat, the spittle of a bird, the breath of a fish, the beard of a woman.”

“Dunno if that last one is a paradox,” I said. “Crazy Alice in Chinatown has a pretty good beard.”

Junior huffed. “The point is, this rope is even better! I call it Andskoti, the Adversary. It is woven with the most powerful paradoxes in the Nine Worlds—Wi-Fi with no lag, a politician’s sincerity, a printer that prints, healthy deep-fried food, and an interesting grammar lecture!”

“Okay, yeah,” I admitted. “Those things don’t exist.”

Blitz stuffed the rope in his backpack. He took out his pouch of tears and handed it to the old dwarf. “Thank you, Junior. I consider our bargain complete, but I would ask one more thing. Where is the island of Fenris Wolf?”

Junior hefted his payment. “If I could tell you, Blitzen, I would. I’d be happy to see you ripped apart by the Wolf like your father was! Alas, I don’t know.”

“But—”

“Yes, I said I checked on the rope from time to time. I lied! The truth is, very few gods or dwarves know where the Wolf’s island appears. Most of them are sworn to secrecy. How your father found the place, I really don’t know, but if you want to find it, the best person to ask is Thor. He knows, and he has a big mouth.”

“Thor,” I said. “Where do we find Thor?”

“I have no idea,” Junior admitted.

Hearthstone signed, *Sam might. She knows a lot about the gods.*

“Yeah.” I turned. “Sam, get over here! Why are you lurking?”

The crowd parted around her.

As soon as Junior saw her, he made a strangled squawk. “You! It was you!”

Sam tried to cover her busted lip. “Sorry? Have we met?”

“Oh, don’t play innocent with me.” Junior scooted forward on his walker, his flushed scalp turning his gray hair pink. “I’ve seen shape-shifters before. That scarf is the same color as the horsefly’s wings. And that black eye is from when I swatted you! You’re in league with Blitzen! Friends, colleagues, honest dwarves—kill these cheaters!”

I was proud that the four of us responded as a team. In perfect unison, like a well-oiled combat machine, we turned and ran for our lives.



## I Get to Know Jack

I'M PRETTY GOOD at multitasking, so I figured I could flee in terror and argue at the same time.

"A horsefly?" I yelled at Sam. "You can turn into a horsefly?"

She ducked as a steam-powered dart buzzed over her head. "Now is not the time!"

"Oh, excuse me. I should wait for the designated talk-about-turning-into-horseflies time."

Hearthstone and Blitzen led the way. Behind us, a mob of thirty dwarves was closing fast. I didn't like their murderous expressions or their fine assortment of handcrafted weapons.

"This way!" Blitzen ducked down an alley.

Unfortunately, Hearthstone wasn't watching. The elf barreled straight ahead.

"Mother!" Blitz cursed—at least, I thought it was a curse until Sam and I reached the corner and faltered.

A few steps down the alley, Blitz was trapped in a net of light. He squirmed and cussed as the glowing web lifted him into the air. "It's my mother!" he yelped. "She wants her damnable earrings. Go! Catch up with Hearthstone! I'll meet you—"

*POP!* Our dwarf disappeared in a flash.

I glanced at Sam. “Did that just happen?”

“We’ve got other problems.” She pulled out her ax.

The mob had caught up with us. They fanned out in an angry semicircle of beards, scowls, baseball bats, and broadswords. I wasn’t sure what they were waiting for. Then I heard Junior’s voice somewhere behind them.

“Hold on!” he wheezed. “I—” *Wheeze*. “Kill—” *Wheeze*. “First!”

The mob parted. Flanked by his bodyguards, the old dwarf pushed his walker toward us.

He eyed me, then Sam.

“Where are Blitzen and the elf?” Junior muttered. “Well, no matter. We’ll find them. You, boy, I don’t care about so much. Run now and I might let you live. The girl is obviously a daughter of Loki. She bit me and ruined my crafting! She dies.”

I pulled off my pendant. The Sword of Summer grew to full length. The crowd of dwarves edged backward. I guess they knew a dangerous blade when they saw one.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I said. “You’ll have to take on both of us.”

The sword hummed for attention.

“Correction,” I said. “You’ll have to take on all *three* of us. This is Sumarbrander, the Sword of Summer, crafted by...actually I’m not sure, but it is definitely famous among swords, and it is about to kick your collective butts.”

“Thank you,” said the sword.

Sam made a squeaking noise. The dwarves’ shocked expressions told me I hadn’t imagined hearing the sword’s voice.

I held up the blade. “You can talk? I mean...of course you can talk. You have many, uh, incredible abilities.”

“That’s what I’ve been saying.” The sword’s voice was definitely male. It emanated from the runes along the blade, which vibrated and glowed with every word like the lights on a stereo equalizer.

I gave the dwarves an arrogant look, like, *Yeah, that’s right. I’ve got a talking disco sword and you don’t*.

“Sumarbrander,” I said, “how do you feel about taking on this mob?”

“Sure,” said the sword. “You want them dead or...?”

The mob shuffled backward in alarm.

“Nah,” I decided. “Just make them go away.”

“You’re no fun,” the sword said. “Okay, then, let go.”

I hesitated. I didn't particularly want to hold a flashing talking humming sword, but dropping my weapon didn't seem like the natural first step toward victory.

Junior must've sensed my reluctance.

"We can take him!" he yelled. "He's one boy with a sword he doesn't know how to use!"

Sam snarled. "And a former Valkyrie with an ax she very much *does* know how to use."

"Bah!" Junior said. "Let's get 'em, boys! Granny Shuffler, activate!"

Rows of dagger blades extended from the front of his walker. Two miniature rocket engines fired in the back, propelling Junior toward us at a mind-boggling one mile an hour. His comrades roared and charged.

I let go of my sword. It hovered in the air for a split second. Then it flew into action. Faster than you could say *son of Edna*, every dwarf was disarmed. Their weapons were cut in half, split down the middle, knocked to the ground, or diced into hors d'oeuvre-size cubes. The daggers and rockets were sheared off Junior's walker. The severed ends of thirty beards fluttered to the pavement, leaving thirty shocked dwarves with fifty percent less facial hair.

The Sword of Summer hovered between the mob and me.

"Anybody want more?" the sword asked.

The dwarves turned and fled.

Junior yelled over his shoulder as he hobbled away, following his bodyguards, who were already a block ahead of him. "This isn't over, boy! I'll be back with reinforcements!"

Sam lowered her ax. "That was...Wow."

"Yeah," I agreed. "Thank you, Sumarbrander."

"*De nada*," said the sword. "But you know, Sumarbrander is a really long name, and I've never liked it much."

"Okay." I wasn't sure where to look when addressing the sword—the glowing runes? The tip of the blade? "What would you like us to call you?"

The sword hummed thoughtfully. "What is your name?"

"Magnus."

"That's a good name. Call me Magnus."

"You can't be Magnus. *I'm* Magnus."

"Then what is her name?"

"Sam. You can't be Sam, either. It would be too confusing."

The blade swished from side to side. “Well, what *is* a good name? Something that fits my personality and my many talents.”

“But I don’t really know you as well as I’d like to.” I looked at Samirah, who just shook her head like, *Hey, it’s your disco sword.*

“Honestly,” I said. “I don’t know jack—”

“Jack!” the sword cried. “Perfect!”

The thing about talking swords...it’s hard to tell when they’re kidding. They have no facial expressions. Or faces.

“So...you want me to call you Jack.”

“It is a noble name,” said the sword. “Fit for kings and sharp carving implements!”

“Okay,” I said. “Well, then, Jack, thanks for the save. You mind if...?” I reached for the hilt, but Jack floated away from me.

“I wouldn’t do that yet,” he warned. “The price of my amazing abilities: as soon as you sheathe me, or turn me into a pendant, or whatever, you will feel just as exhausted as if you had performed all my actions yourself.”

My shoulder muscles tightened. I considered how tired I would feel if I had just destroyed all those weapons and cut all those beards. “Oh. I didn’t notice that earlier.”

“Because you hadn’t used me for anything amazing yet.”

“Right.”

In the distance, an air raid horn howled. I doubted they got many air raids in an underground world, so I figured the alarm had to do with us.

“We need to go,” Sam urged. “We have to find Hearthstone. I doubt Junior was joking about reinforcements.”

Finding Hearthstone was the easy part. Two blocks away, we ran into him as he was coming back to find us.

*What the H-e-l-h-e-i-m?* he signed. *Where is Blitzen?*

I told him about Freya’s gold net. “We’ll find him. Right now, Junior is calling up the Dwarven National Guard.”

*Your sword is floating,* Hearth noted.

“Your elf is deaf,” Jack noted.

I turned to the sword. “I know that. Sorry, introductions. Jack, Hearth. Hearth, Jack.”

Hearth signed, *Is it talking? I don’t read sword lips.*

“What is he saying?” Jack asked. “I don’t read elf hands.”

“Guys.” Sam pointed behind us. A few blocks away, an iron-plated vehicle with caterpillar treads and a mounted turret was turning slowly onto our street.

“That’s a tank,” I said. “Junior has a *tank*?”

“We should leave,” Jack said. “I am awesome, but if I try to destroy a tank, the strain might kill you.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “How do we get out of Nidavellir?”

Hearthstone clapped for my attention. *This way*.

We sprinted after him, zigzagging through alleys, knocking over carefully handcrafted garbage cans that probably had names and souls.

From somewhere behind us, a deep *BOOM!* rattled windows and made pebbles rain from above.

“Is the tank shaking the *sky*?” I yelled. “That *can’t* be good.”

Hearthstone led us down another street of clapboard row houses.

Dwarves sat on stoops, clapping and cheering as we ran by. A few of them recorded videos of us on uniquely crafted smartphones. I figured our attempted getaway would go viral on the Dwarven Internet, famous among Internets.

Finally we reached what would’ve been the southern edge of South Boston. On the far side of the avenue, instead of the M Street Beach, the ground dropped off into a chasm.

“Oh, this is very helpful,” Sam said.

Behind us in the gloom, Junior’s voice shouted, “Bazookas, take the right flank!”

Hearthstone led us to the rim of the canyon. Far below, a river roared.

He signed: *We jump in*.

“Are you serious?” I asked.

*Blitzen and I did this before. River washes out of Nidavellir.*

“To where?”

*Depends*, Hearthstone signed.

“That’s not reassuring,” said Sam.

Hearthstone pointed back toward the avenue. The dwarven mob was gathering, tanks and jeeps and RPGs and a whole bunch of really angry geriatric dwarves in armor-plated walkers.

“We jump,” I decided.

Jack the Sword hovered next to me. “Better hold me now, boss. Otherwise I might get lost again.”

“But you said the exhaustion—”

“Might make you pass out,” the sword agreed. “On the bright side, it looks like you’re going to die anyway.”

He had a point. (Oh, sorry. That was bad.) I took the sword and willed it back into pendant form. I just had time to attach it to the chain before my legs buckled.

Sam caught me. “Hearthstone! Take his other arm!”

As my vision went dark, Sam and Hearth helped me leap off the cliff. Because, you know, what are friends for?



## Aboard the Good Ship *Toenail*

I KNEW I WAS IN TROUBLE when I woke up dreaming.

I found myself standing next to Loki on the deck of a massive ship.

“There you are!” said Loki. “I was starting to wonder.”

“How...?” I noticed his outfit. “What are you wearing?”

“You like it?” His scarred lips twisted into a grin. His white admiral’s jacket gleamed with medals, but Loki wasn’t exactly wearing it regulation-style. It was open over a black T-shirt featuring Jack Nicholson’s face from *The Shining*. The caption read: HEEEERE’S LOKI!

“Where are we?” I asked.

Loki polished his medals with his coat sleeve. “Well, neither of us is *here*, of course. I’m still tied up on a stone slab with snake poison dripping in my face. You’re dying on the banks of a river in Jotunheim.”

“I’m what?”

“Whether you live or not, this may be our last chance to talk. I wanted you to see this—*Naglfar*, the Ship of Nails! It’s almost complete.”

The ship came into clearer focus—a Viking longship larger than an aircraft carrier. The main deck could’ve accommodated the Boston Marathon. Giant shields lined the railings. Fore and aft rose thirty-foot-tall figureheads shaped like snarling wolves. Naturally, they had to be wolves.

I peered over the side between two shields. A hundred feet down, braided iron cables moored the ship to a dock. The gray sea churned with ice.

I ran my hand along the railing. The surface was bumpy and prickly—enameled with white and gray ridges like fish scales or pearl shavings. At first glance, I'd assumed the deck was made of steel, but now I realized the whole ship was constructed of this weird translucent material—not metal, not wood, but something strangely familiar.

“What is this?” I asked Loki. “I don’t see any wood or nails. Why is it called the Ship of Nails?”

Loki chuckled. “Not *carpentry* nails, Magnus. *Naglfar* is made from the fingernails and toenails of dead men.”

The deck seemed to pitch beneath me. I wasn’t sure if it was possible to puke in a dream, but I was tempted. It wasn’t just the obvious grossness of standing on a ship made of nail clippings that made me nauseated—it was the sheer *volume* of the material. How many corpses had had to contribute their nails to make a ship this size?

Once I managed to steady my breathing, I faced Loki. “Why?”

Even with the ruined lips and scarred face, Loki’s grin was so infectious, I almost smiled back—*almost*.

“Amazingly disgusting, isn’t it?” he said. “Back in the old days, your ancestors knew that nail clippings carried part of your spirit, your essence... your DNA, you’d call it now. Throughout their lives, mortals were careful to burn any clippings they made. When they died, their nails would be trimmed and the clippings destroyed so the material wouldn’t contribute to this great ship. But sometimes”—Loki shrugged—“as you can see, the proper precautions weren’t taken.”

“You’ve built yourself a battleship out of toenails.”

“Well, the ship is building *itself*. And, technically, *Naglfar* belongs to Surt and the fire giants, but when Ragnarok comes, I will guide this ship out of the harbor. We’ll have an army of giants led by Captain Hrym, plus hundreds of thousands of dishonored dead from Helheim—all those who were careless or unlucky enough to die without a sword in their hand, a proper burial, and a decent post-mortem mani-pedi. We’ll sail to Asgard and destroy the gods. It’ll be awesome.”

I looked aft, expecting to see an army gathering on the shore, but the mist was so thick I couldn’t see the end of the dock. Despite my usual

resistance to cold, the damp air soaked into my bones and made my teeth chatter.

“Why are you showing me this?” I asked.

“Because I like you, Magnus. You’ve got a sense of humor. You’ve got *zing*. So rare in a demigod! Even rarer among the einherjar. I’m glad my daughter found you.”

“Samirah...that’s how she can turn into a horsefly. She’s a shape-shifter like you.”

“Oh, she’s Daddy’s girl, all right. She doesn’t like to admit it, but she’s inherited a lot of things from me: my abilities, my dashing good looks, my keen intellect. She can spot talent too. After all, she chose you, my friend.”

I clutched my stomach. “I don’t feel so good.”

“Duh! You’re on the verge of death. Personally, I hope you wake up, because if you kick the bucket now, your death will be meaningless and nothing you’ve done will matter.”

“Thanks for the pep talk.”

“Listen—I brought you here for some perspective. When Ragnarok comes, *all* bonds will break, not just the ropes binding Fenris. The moorings of this ship—*snap*. The bindings that hold me captive—*snap*. Whether or not you keep that sword out of Surt’s hands, it’s only a matter of time. One bond will snap and they’ll all start going—unraveling like one huge tapestry.”

“You’re trying to discourage me? I thought you wanted Ragnarok delayed.”

“Oh, I do!” He put up his hands. His wrists were raw and bleeding, as if he’d been handcuffed too tightly. “I’m totally on your side, Magnus! Look at the figureheads. The wolves’ snouts aren’t finished yet. Is there anything more embarrassing than sailing into battle with half-finished figureheads?”

“So what do you want?”

“The same thing I’ve always wanted,” Loki said. “To help you fight your fate. Which of the gods besides me has bothered to speak to you as a friend and an equal?”

His eyes were like Sam’s—bright and intense, the color of burning—but there was something harder and more calculating about Loki’s gaze—something that didn’t jibe with his friendly smile. I remembered how Sam had described him: *a liar, a thief, a murderer*.

“We’re friends now?” I asked. “Equals?”

“We could be,” he said. “In fact, I have an idea. Forget going to Fenris’s island. Forget facing Surt. I know a place where the sword will be safe.”

“With you?”

Loki laughed. “Don’t tempt me, kid. No, no. I was thinking about your Uncle Randolph. He understands the value of the sword. He’s spent his life looking for it, preparing to study it. You might not know it, but his house is *heavily* fortified with magic. If you took the sword to him...well, the old man can’t use it himself. But he would store it away. It would be out of Surt’s hands. And that’s what matters, eh? It would buy us all some time.”

I wanted to laugh in Loki’s face and tell him no. I figured he was trying to trick me. Yet I couldn’t see his angle.

“You think it’s a trap,” Loki said. “I get that. But you must have wondered why Mimir told you to take the blade to the Wolf’s island—the very place where Surt *wants* to use it. What’s the sense in that? What if Mimir is playing you? I mean, come on. That old severed head runs a pachinko racket! If you don’t bring the sword to the island, Surt won’t be able get his hands on it. Why take the risk?”

I struggled to clear my thoughts. “You’re—you’re a smooth talker. You’d make a good used car salesman.”

Loki winked. “I think the term is *pre-owned*. You’ve got to make a choice soon, Magnus. We may not be able to speak again. If you want a gesture of good faith, however, I can sweeten the deal. My daughter Hel and I...we’ve been talking.”

My heart jackknifed. “Talking about...”

“I’ll let her tell you. But now...” He tilted his head, listening. “Yes, we don’t have much time. You might be waking up.”

“Why were you bound?” The question forced itself out before I realized I was thinking it. “I remember you killed somebody....”

His smile hardened. The angry lines around his eyes made him look ten years older.

“You know how to ruin a conversation,” Loki said. “I killed Balder, the god of light—the handsome, perfect, *incredibly* annoying son of Odin and Frigg.” He stepped toward me and poked my chest, emphasizing each word. “And—I’d—do—it—again.”

In the back of my brain, my common sense yelled, *DROP IT!* But as you have probably figured out by now, I don’t listen to my common sense much.

“Why did you kill him?”

Loki barked a laugh. His breath smelled of almonds, like cyanide. “Did I mention he was annoying? Frigg was so worried about him. The poor baby had been having bad dreams about his own doom. Welcome to *reality*, Balder! We *all* have bad dreams. But Frigg couldn’t stand the idea that her precious angel might bruise his little foot. She exacted promises from everything in creation that nothing would hurt her beautiful son—people, gods, trees, rocks....Can you imagine exacting a promise from a rock? Frigg managed it. Afterward, the gods had a party to celebrate. They started throwing things at Balder just for laughs. Arrows, swords, boulders, each other...nothing would hurt him. It was as if the idiot was surrounded by a force field. Well...*I’m sorry*. The thought of Mr. Perfect also being Mr. Invulnerable made me sick.”

I blinked, trying to get the sting out of my eyes. Loki’s voice was so full of hatred it seemed to make the air burn. “You found a way to kill him.”

“Mistletoe!” Loki’s smile brightened. “Can you imagine? Frigg forgot one tiny little plant. I fashioned a dart from the stuff, gave it to Balder’s blind brother, a god named Hod. I didn’t want him to miss the fun of chucking deadly objects at Balder, so I guided Hod’s hand and...well, Frigg’s worst fears came true. Balder *deserved* it.”

“For being too handsome and popular.”

“Yes!”

“For being loved.”

“Exactly!” Loki leaned forward until we were almost nose-to-nose. “Don’t tell me *you* haven’t done the same kinds of things. Those cars you broke into, those people you stole from...you picked people you didn’t like, eh? You picked the rich handsome stuck-up snobs who *annoyed* you.”

My teeth chattered harder. “I never *killed* anyone.”

“Oh, please.” Loki stepped back, examining me with a look of disappointment. “It’s only a matter of degree. So I killed a god. Big deal! He went to Helheim and became an honored guest in my daughter’s palace. And *my* punishment? You want to know *my* punishment?”

“You were tied on a stone slab,” I said. “With poison from a snake dripping on your face. I know.”

“Do you?” Loki pulled back his cuffs, showing me the raw scars on his wrists. “The gods were not content to punish me with eternal torture. They took out their wrath upon my two favorite sons—Vali and Narvi. They

turned Vali into a wolf and watched with amusement while he disemboweled his brother Narvi. Then they shot and gutted the wolf. The gods took my innocent sons' own entrails..." Loki's voice cracked with grief. "Well, Magnus Chase, let's just say I was not bound with *ropes*."

Something in my chest curled up and died—possibly my hope that there was any kind of justice in the universe. "Gods."

Loki nodded. "Yes, Magnus. The *gods*. Think about that when you meet Thor."

"I'm meeting Thor?"

"I'm afraid so. The gods don't even *pretend* to deal in good and evil, Magnus. It's not the Aesir way. Might makes right. So tell me...do you really want to charge into battle on their behalf?"

The ship trembled under my feet. Fog rolled across the deck.

"Time for you to go," Loki said. "Remember what I said. Oh, and have fun getting mouth-to-mouth from a goat."

"Wait...what?"

Loki wiggled his fingers, his eyes full of malicious glee. Then the ship dissolved into gray nothingness.



## I Psychoanalyze a Goat

AS LOKI HAD PROMISED, I woke up with a goat in my face.

Confession time: My only previous experience with kissing had been with Jackie Molotov in seventh grade, behind the bleachers at a school dance. Yes, I know that's lame, seeing as how I was now sixteen. But during the past few years I'd been a little busy, living on the street and whatnot. Anyway, with apologies to Jackie, getting mouth-to-mouth from a goat reminded me of her.

I rolled over and puked into the river conveniently located right next to me. My bones felt as if they'd been broken and mended with duct tape. My mouth tasted like chewed grass and old nickels.

"Oh, you're alive," said the goat. He sounded mildly disappointed.

I sat up and groaned. The goat's horns curved outward like the top half of an hourglass. Sticker burrs matted his shaggy brown fur.

A lot of questions crowded into my head: *Where am I? Why are you a talking goat? Why does your breath smell so bad? Have you been eating spare change?*

The first question that came out was: "Where are my friends?"

"The elf and girl?" asked the goat. "Oh, they're dead."

My heart threatened to exit via my throat. "What? No!"

The goat gestured with his horns. A few yards to my right, Hearthstone and Sam lay crumpled on the rocky beach.

I scrambled over. I placed my hands on their throats and almost passed out again, from relief this time.

“They’re not dead,” I told the goat. “They both have pulses.”

“Oh.” The goat sighed. “Well, give them a few more hours and they’ll probably be dead.”

“What is *wrong* with you?”

“Everything,” said the goat. “My whole life is one big—”

“Never mind,” I said. “Just be quiet.”

The goat brayed. “Sure, I understand. You don’t want to know my problems. No one does. I’ll be over here, weeping or whatever. Just ignore me.”

Keeping my hands against Sam’s and Hearthstone’s carotid arteries, I sent warmth through my fingertips into their circulatory systems.

Sam was easy to heal. Her heart was strong. She responded almost immediately, her eyes fluttering open, her lungs gasping for air. She curled sideways and began vomiting, which I took as a good sign.

Hearthstone, though...something was wrong beyond the water in his lungs and the cold in his limbs. Right at his core, a dense knot of dark emotion sapped his will to live. The pain was so intense it threw me back to the night of my mother’s death. I remembered my hands slipping from the fire escape, the windows of our apartment exploding above me.

Hearthstone’s grief was even worse than that. I didn’t know exactly what he had suffered, but his despair almost overwhelmed me. I grasped for a happy memory—my mom and me picking wild blueberries on Hancock Hill, the air so clear I could see Quincy Bay glittering on the horizon. I sent a flood of warmth into Hearthstone’s chest.

His eyes flew open.

He stared at me, uncomprehending. Then he pointed at my face and gestured weakly—the sign for light.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Sam groaned. She rose on one arm and squinted at me. “Magnus...why are you glowing?”

I looked at my hands. Sure enough, I seemed to have been dipped in Folkvanger light. The warm buttery aura was starting to fade, but I could feel residual power tingling along my arm hairs.

“Apparently,” I said, “if I heal too much at once, I glow.”

Sam winced. “Well, thanks for healing us. But try not to self-combust. How is Hearth?”

I helped him sit up. “How you feeling, buddy?”

He made a circle with his thumb and middle finger, then flicked it upward, the sign for *terrible*.

No surprise. Given the depth of pain I’d felt within him, I was surprised he wasn’t constantly screaming.

“Hearth...” I started to say, “when I healed you, I—”

He put his hands over mine—a sign language version of *hush*.

Maybe we had some residual connection from the healing magic, but when I met Hearthstone’s eyes, I could tell what he was thinking. His message was an almost audible voice in my head—like when Jack the sword had started to speak.

*Later*, Hearth told me. *Thank you...brother.*

I was too startled to reply.

The goat plodded over. “You really should take better care of your elf. They need lots of sunshine—not this weak Jotunheim light. And you can’t overwater them by drowning them in rivers.”

Hearthstone frowned. He signed, *The goat is speaking?*

I tried to clear my head. “Uh, yeah, he is.”

“I also read sign language,” said the goat. “My name is Tanngnjóstr, which means Teeth Grinder, because...well, it’s a nervous habit of mine. But nobody calls me Tanngnjóstr. It’s a horrible name. Just call me Otis.”

Sam struggled to her feet. Her hijab had come undone and now hung around her neck like a gunslinger’s bandanna. “So, Otis, what brings you here to this place that is...wherever we are?”

Otis sighed. “I got lost. Which is typical. I was trying to find my way back to camp when I found you all instead. I suppose you’ll kill me and eat me for dinner now.”

I frowned at Sam. “Were you planning to kill the goat?”

“No. Were you?”

I looked at Otis. “We weren’t planning to kill you.”

“It’s okay if you want to,” Otis said. “I’m used to it. My master kills me all the time.”

“He...does?” I asked.

“Oh, sure. I’m basically a talking meal on four hooves. My therapist says that’s why I’m so down all the time, but I don’t know. I think it goes way back to when I was a kid—”

“Sorry. Wait. Who is your master?”

Hearthstone spelled out, *T-H-O-R. D-U-H.*

“That’s right,” said the goat. “Although his last name is not *Duh*. You haven’t seen him, have you?”

“No...” I thought about my dream. I could still smell the bitter almonds on Loki’s breath. *The gods don’t even pretend to deal in good and evil, Magnus. Think about that when you meet Thor.*

Junior had told us to seek out Thor. The river had somehow brought us to where we needed to be. Only now, I wasn’t sure I wanted to be here.

Sam readjusted her headscarf. “I’m not a big fan of Thor, but if he can give us directions to Lyngvi, we need to talk to him.”

“Except the goat is lost,” I said. “So how do we find Thor?”

Hearthstone pointed to my pendant. *Ask Jack.*

Instead of spelling the name, he made the sign for *jack-in-the-box*, which looked like a finger rabbit popping up from behind his hand.

Sometimes sign language can be a little too literal.

I pulled off the pendant. The sword grew to full length and began to hum.

“Hey,” said Jack, the runes glowing along his blade, “glad you survived! Oh, is that Otis? Cool! Thor must be around here somewhere.”

Otis bleated. “You have a talking sword? I’ve never been killed by a talking sword before. That’s fine. If you could just make a clean cut right across the throat—”

“Otis!” Jack said. “Don’t you know me? I’m Frey’s Sword, Sumarbrander. We met at that party at Bilskirner—the one where you were playing tug-of-war with Loki?”

“Oh...” Otis shook his horns. “Yes. That was embarrassing.”

“Jack,” I said, “we’re looking for Thor. Any chance you can point us in the right direction?”

“Easy McSqueeezy.” The sword tugged at my arm. “I’m reading a big concentration of hot air and thunder that way!”

Sam and I helped Hearthstone to his feet. He wasn’t looking too good. His lips were pale green. He wobbled like he’d just gotten off a Tilt-a-Whirl.

“Otis,” Sam said, “can our friend ride you? It might be quicker.”

“Sure,” the goat said. “Ride me, kill me, whatever. But I should warn you, this is Jotunheim. If we go the wrong way, we’ll run across giants. Then we’ll all be butchered and put in a stew pot.”

“We won’t go the wrong way,” I promised. “Will we, Jack?”

“Hmm?” said the sword. “Oh, no. Probably not. Like, a sixty percent chance we’ll live.”

“Jack....”

“Kidding,” he said. “Jeez, so uptight.”

He pointed upstream and led us through the foggy morning, with spotty snow flurries and a forty percent chance of death.



## Hearthstone Passes Out Even More than Jason Grace (Though I Have No Idea Who That Is)

JOTUNHEIM LOOKED a lot like Vermont, just with fewer signs offering maple syrup products. Snow dusted the dark mountains. Waist-high drifts choked the valleys. Pine trees bristled with icicles. Jack hovered in front, guiding us along the river as it zigzagged through canyons blanketed in subzero shadows. We climbed trails next to half-frozen waterfalls, my sweat chilling instantly against my skin.

In other words, it was a huge amount of fun.

Sam and I stayed close to Hearthstone. I hoped my residual aura of Frey-glow might do him some good, but he still looked pretty weak. The best we could do was keep him from sliding off the goat.

“Hang in there,” I told him.

He signed something—maybe *sorry*—but his gesture was so listless I wasn’t sure.

“Just rest,” I said.

He grunted in frustration. He groped through his bag of runes, pulled one out, and placed it in my hands. He pointed to the stone, then to himself, as if to say *This is me*.

The rune was one I didn't know:



Sam frowned when she saw it. "That's *perthro*."

"What does it mean?" I asked.

She glanced cautiously at Hearth. "Are you trying to explain what happened to you? You want Magnus to know?"

Hearthstone took a deep breath, like he was preparing for a sprint. He signed: *Magnus-felt-pain*.

I closed my fingers around the stone. "Yeah....When I healed you, there was something dark—"

Hearth pointed again at the stone. He looked at Sam.

"You want me to tell him?" she asked. "You sure?"

He nodded, then rested his head against the goat's back and closed his eyes.

We walked for about twenty yards before Sam said anything.

"When Hearth and I were in Alfheim," she started, "he told me part of his story. I don't know all the details, but...his parents..." She struggled to find words.

Otis the goat bleated. "Go on. I love depressing stories."

"Be quiet," Sam ordered.

"I'll just be quiet, then," the goat agreed.

I studied Hearthstone's face. He looked so peaceful asleep. "Blitzen told me a little bit," I said. "Hearth's parents never accepted him, because he was deaf."

"It was worse than that," Sam said. "They were...not good people."

Some of Loki's acidic tone crept into her voice, as if she were imagining Hearth's parents on the receiving end of mistletoe darts. "Hearth had a brother—Andiron—who died very young. It wasn't Hearthstone's fault, but his parents took out their bitterness on him. They always told him the wrong brother had died. To them, Hearth was a disappointment, a disabled elf, a punishment from the gods. He could do no right."

I clenched the runestone. "He still carries all that pain inside. Gods..."

Sam laid her hand on Hearth's ankle. "He couldn't tell me the details of how he grew up, but I—I got the feeling it was worse than you can imagine."

I looked at the rune. “No wonder he daydreamed about working magic. But this symbol...?”

“Perthro symbolizes an empty cup lying sideways,” Sam said. “It could be spilled drink, or a cup waiting to be filled, or a cup for throwing dice, like fate.”

“I don’t understand.”

Sam brushed some goat hair from Hearthstone’s pants cuff. “I think...I think perthro is the rune Hearthstone personally relates to. When he went to Mimir and drank from the well, Hearthstone was offered a choice between two futures. If he took the first path, Mimir would grant him speech and hearing and send him back to Alfheim to live a normal life, but he would have to give up his dream of magic. If he chose the second path—”

“He’d learn magic,” I guessed, “but he would stay the way he is—deaf and dumb, hated by his own parents. What kind of messed-up choice is that? I should’ve stepped on Mimir’s face when I had the chance.”

Sam shook her head. “Mimir just presented the choices. Magic and normal life are mutually exclusive. Only people who have known great pain have the capacity to learn magic. They have to be like hollow cups. Even Odin...he gave up an eye to drink from Mimir’s well, but that was just the beginning. In order to learn the runes, Odin fashioned a noose and hanged himself from a branch of the World Tree for nine days.”

My stomach checked to see if it had anything left to retch. It settled for dry spasms. “That’s...not right.”

“But it was necessary,” Sam said. “Odin pierced his side with his own spear and hung there in pain, without food or water, until the runes revealed themselves. The pain made him hollow...a receptacle for magic.”

I looked at Hearthstone. I wasn’t sure whether to hug him or wake him up and scold him. How could anyone willingly choose to hold on to that much pain? What kind of magic could possibly be worth the cost?

“I’ve done magic,” I said. “Healing, walking into flames, blasting weapons out of people’s hands. But I’ve never suffered like Hearth has.”

Samirah pursed her lips. “That’s different, Magnus. You were born with your magic—an inheritance from your father. You can’t choose your abilities or change them. Alf seidr is innate. It’s also lesser magic compared to what the runes can do.”

“Lesser?” I didn’t want to argue about whose magic was more impressive, but most of the things I’d seen Hearthstone do had been

pretty...subtle.

"I told you back in Valhalla," Sam said, "the runes are the secret language of the universe. Learning them, you can recode reality. The only limits on your magic are your strength and your imagination."

"So why don't more people learn runes?"

"That's what I've been telling you. It requires incredible sacrifice. Most people would die before they got as far as Hearthstone has."

I tucked Hearthstone's scarf around his neck. I understood now why he'd been willing to risk rune magic. To a guy with his troubled past, recoding reality must have sounded pretty good. I also thought about the message he'd whispered into my mind. He'd called me *brother*. After everything Hearthstone had been through with his own brother's death... that could not have been easy.

"So Hearth made himself an empty cup," I said. "Like perthro."

"Trying to fill himself with the power of magic," Sam agreed. "I don't know all the meanings of perthro, Magnus. But I do know one thing—Hearthstone cast it when we were falling from the cliff into the river."

I tried to remember, but I'd been overwhelmed with exhaustion as soon as I gripped the sword. "What did it do?"

"It got us *here*," Sam said. "And it left Hearthstone like that." She nodded to his snoring form. "I can't be sure, but I think perthro is his...what do Christians call it? A 'Hail Mary pass.' He was throwing that rune like you'd throw dice from a cup, turning our fate over to the gods."

My palm was now bruised from clenching the stone. I still wasn't sure why Hearthstone had given it to me, but I felt a strong instinct to keep it for him—if only temporarily. No one should carry that kind of fate alone. I slipped the rune into my pocket.

We trekked through the wilderness in silence for a while. At one point, Jack led us over the river on a fallen tree trunk. I couldn't help looking both ways for giant squirrels before crossing.

In places the snow was so deep we had to hop from boulder to boulder while Otis the goat speculated about which one of us would slip, fall, and die first.

"I wish you'd be quiet," I muttered. "I also wish we had snowshoes."

"You'd need Uller for that," said the goat.

"Who?"

“The god of snowshoes,” said Otis. “He invented them. Also archery and...I don’t know, other stuff.”

I’d never heard of a snowshoe god. But I would’ve paid real money if the god of snowmobiles had come roaring out of the woods right then to give us a lift.

We kept trudging along.

Once, we spotted a stone house on the summit of a hill. The gray light and the mountains played tricks with my perception. I couldn’t tell if the house was small and nearby, or massive and far away. I remembered what my friends had told me about giants—that they lived and breathed illusions.

“See that house?” Jack said. “Let’s not go there.”

I didn’t argue.

Judging time was difficult, but by late afternoon the river had turned into a raging current. Cliffs rose along the opposite bank. In the distance, through the trees, I heard the roar of a waterfall.

“Oh, that’s right,” said Otis. “I remember now.”

“You remember what?” I asked.

“Why I left. I was supposed to get help for my master.”

Sam brushed a clump of snow off her shoulder. “Why would Thor need help?”

“The rapids,” said Otis. “I guess we’d better hurry. I was supposed be quick, but I stood watching you guys for almost a day.”

I flinched. “Wait...we were unconscious for *a whole day*?”

“At least,” said Otis.

“He’s right,” Jack said. “According to my internal clock, it’s Sunday the nineteenth. I warned you, once you took hold of me...well, we fought those dwarves on Friday. You slept all the way through Saturday.”

Sam grimaced. “We’ve lost valuable time. The Wolf’s island will appear in three more days, and we don’t even know where Blitzen is.”

“Probably my fault,” Otis offered. “I should’ve saved you earlier, but giving a human mouth-to-mouth—I had to work up my nerve. My therapist gave me some breathing exercises—”

“Guys,” Jack the sword interrupted, “we’re close now. For real this time.” He hovered off through the woods.

We followed the floating sword until the trees parted. In front of us stretched a beach of jagged black rocks and chunks of ice. On the opposite bank, sheer cliffs rose into the sky. The river had turned into full-on class

five rapids—a combat zone of whitewater and half-submerged boulders. Upstream, the river was compressed between two skyscraper-size stone columns—man-made or natural, I couldn’t tell. Their tops were lost in the clouds. From the fissure between them, the river blasted out in a vertical sheet—less like a waterfall and more like a dam splitting down the middle.

Suddenly Jotunheim did not seem like Vermont. It seemed more like the Himalayas—someplace not meant for mortals.

It was hard to focus on anything except the raging falls, but eventually I noticed a small campsite on the beach—a tent, a fire pit, and a second goat with dark fur pacing nervously on the shore. When the goat saw us, he came galloping over.

Otis turned to us and shouted over the roar of the river, “This is Marvin! He’s my brother! His proper name is Tanngrisnr—Snarler—but—”

“Otis!” Marvin yelled. “Where have you been?”

“I forgot what I was doing,” said Otis.

Marvin bleated in exasperation. His lips were curled in a permanent snarl, which—gee, I dunno—might have been how he got the name Snarler.

“This is the help you found?” Marvin fixed his yellow eyes on me.  
“Two scrawny humans and a dead elf?”

“He’s not dead!” I yelled. “Where is Thor?”

“In the river!” Marvin pointed with his horns. “The god of thunder is about to drown, and if you don’t figure out a way to help him, I’ll kill you. By the way, nice to meet you.”



## Well, There's Your Problem. You've Got a Sword Up Your Nose

### I COULDN'T HELP IT.

When I heard the name Thor, I thought about the guy from the movies and comics—a big superhero from outer space, with bright Spandex tights, a red cape, goldilocks hair, and maybe a helmet with fluffy little dove wings.

In real life, Thor was scarier. And redder. And grungier.

Also, he could cuss like a drunken, creative sailor.

“Mother-grubbing scum bucket!” he yelled. (Or something along those lines. My brain may have filtered the actual language, as it would’ve made my ears bleed.) “Where is my backup?”

He stood chest-deep in the flood near the opposite side, clinging to a scrubby bush that grew from the cliff. The rock was so smooth and slick there were no other handholds. The bush looked like it was about to pull free of its roots. Any minute, Thor was going to get flushed downstream, where rows of jagged rocks shredded the current in a series of cataracts, perfect for making a Thor smoothie.

From this distance, through the spray of water and mist, I couldn't see much of the god himself: shoulder-length red hair, a curly red beard, and bodybuilder arms protruding from a sleeveless leather jerkin. He wore dark

iron gauntlets that reminded me of robot hands, and a chain mail vest Blitzen would've found very trendy.

"Beard-burning son of a mud-lover!" roared the god. "Otis, is that you? Where's my artillery? My air support? Where the Helheim is my cavalry?"

"I'm here, boss!" Otis called. "I brought...two kids and a dead elf!"

"He's not dead," I said again.

"A half-dead elf," Otis corrected.

"What good is that?" Thor bellowed. "I need that giantess killed, and I need her killed NOW!"

"Giantess?" I asked.

Marvin head-butted me. "That one, stupid."

He nodded toward the waterfall. For a moment, the fog cleared from the tops of the cliffs, and I saw the problem.

Next to me, Sam made a sound like she was being garroted. "Holy Heimdall."

Those skyscraper-size pillars of rock were actually legs—*immense* legs so gray and rough they blended in with the surrounding cliffs. The rest of the woman was so tall she made Godzilla look like a toy poodle. She made the Sears Tower look like a traffic cone. Her thigh-length dress was stitched together from so many animal hides it probably represented the extinction of several dozen species. Her face, somewhere up there in the stratosphere, was as stony and grim as a Mount Rushmore president's, surrounded by a hurricane of long dark hair. She gripped the cliff tops on either side of the river as if straddling the torrent was hard even for her.

She looked down, smiling cruelly at the little speck of thunder god caught in the current, then squeezed her legs closer together. The waterfall sprayed out between her shins in a highly pressurized curtain of liquid force.

Thor tried to shout but got a mouthful of river. His head went under. The bush he was clinging to bent sideways, its roots snapping one after the other.

"She's going to wash him into oblivion!" Marvin said. "Do something, humans!"

*Like what?* I thought.

"He's a god," I said. "Can't he fly? Can't he zap her with lightning or—what about his hammer? Doesn't he have a hammer?"

Marvin snarled. He was very good at snarling. “Gee, why didn’t we think of that? If Thor could do any of those things without losing his grip and getting instantly killed, don’t you think he would’ve done it by now?”

I wanted to ask how a god could get killed, since they were supposed to be immortal. Then I thought about Mimir existing forever as a severed head, and Balder getting cut down by a mistletoe dart and spending eternity down in Hel World.

I looked at Sam.

She shrugged helplessly. “Against a giant that big, I have nothing.”

Hearthstone mumbled in his sleep. His eyelids were starting to flutter, but he wasn’t going to be casting magic anytime soon.

That left me only one friend to call on.

“Jack.”

The sword hovered next to me. “Yeah?”

“You see that massive giantess blocking the river?”

“Technically speaking,” Jack said, “I can’t see anything, because I don’t have eyes. But yes, I see the giant.”

“You think you could fly up there and, I dunno, kill her?”

Jack hummed indignantly. “You want me to kill a two-thousand-foot-tall giantess?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, here’s the thing. You’d need to grab me and throw me like you’ve never thrown anything before. You’d need to *really* believe that killing this giantess is a worthy deed. And you’d need to be prepared for what will happen when you take hold of me again. How much energy would it take you, personally, to climb that two-thousand-foot-tall giant and kill her?”

*The effort would probably destroy me*, I thought. But I didn’t see much choice.

We needed information from Thor. Sam and Hearthstone and two antisocial talking goats were depending on me.

“Let’s do it.” I grabbed the sword.

I tried to focus. I didn’t care so much about saving Thor. I didn’t even know the guy. Nor did I particularly care why a half-mile-tall giantess thought it was funny to stand in a river and spray a waterfall between her shins.

But I *did* care about Sam, Blitzen, and Hearthstone. They'd risked their lives to get me this far. No matter what Loki promised, I had to find a way to stop Surt and keep Fenris Wolf chained. The Wolf had caused my mother's death. Mimir had said that Fenris sent his two children....They were supposed to kill *me*. My mom had sacrificed her life to keep me alive. I had to make her sacrifice *mean* something.

The huge gray giantess represented everything that was in my way. She had to go.

With every bit of my strength, I threw the sword.

Jack sliced skyward like a rocket-powered boomerang.

What happened next...well, I wasn't sure I saw correctly. It was a long way up. But it looked like Jack flew into the giantess's left nostril.

The giantess arched her back. She made a face like she was going to sneeze. Her hands slipped from the cliff tops. Jack flew out of her right nostril as the giantess's knees buckled and she fell toward us.

"Timber!" Jack yelled, spiraling back to me.

"RUN!" I screamed.

Too late. The giantess face-planted in the river with a mighty *FLOOM!*

I have no memory of the wall of water that washed me into a tree, along with Sam, a half-asleep Hearthstone, and the two startled goats.

Nevertheless, that's what must have happened. By sheer luck, none of us died.

The giantess's body had completely changed the topography. Where there had been a river, there was now a wide icy marsh, with water gurgling and spluttering around Dead Lady Island as it tried to find new ways to get downstream. The beach was six inches underwater. Thor's campsite had vanished. The god himself was nowhere to be seen.

"You killed Thor!" Otis bleated. "You dropped a giantess on him!"

The giantess's right arm twitched. I almost fell out of the tree. I was afraid Jack had only stunned her, but then Thor wriggled his way out of the giantess's armpit with much cursing and grunting.

Sam and I helped Hearthstone out of the tree as the god of thunder trudged across the giantess's back, jumped into the marsh, and waded toward us. His eyes were blue, rimmed with angry red. His expression was so fierce it would've sent wild boars running for their mommies.

Jack the sword appeared at my side, glistening with various types of goo typically found in a giant's nostril.

“So what do you think, *señor*?” His runes glowed. “You proud of me?”  
“I’ll answer that if I survive the next two minutes.”

The angry god stopped in front of me. Water dripped from his red beard onto his extremely large chain-mail-clad chest. His pot-roast-size fists were clenched in their iron gauntlets.

“That”—he cracked a grin—“was amazing!”

He clapped me on the shoulder so hard he dislocated several joints.  
“Join me for dinner! We can kill Otis and Marvin!”



## No Spoilers. Thor Is Way Behind on His Shows

YEP. WE KILLED THE GOATS.

Thor promised they would be resurrected good as new the next morning, so long as we didn't break any bones. Otis assured me frequent death was good for his exposure therapy. Marvin growled at me to get on with it and not be a weak-kneed wimp.

It was a lot easier killing Marvin.

After two years of homelessness, I thought I knew how tough it could be to keep myself fed, but let me tell you: killing and butchering an animal for my own supper was a new experience. You think it's gross to pull a half-eaten sandwich out of a trash bin? Try skinning a goat, cutting it into chunks, building a fire, then cooking the meat on a spit while attempting to ignore the goat heads staring at you from the scrap pile.

You might assume that kind of experience would turn me into a vegetarian. But nope. As soon as I smelled the cooking meat, my hunger took over. I forgot all about the horrors of goat slaughter. Those Otis-kebabs were the best things I ever tasted.

As we ate, Thor chatted about giants, Jotunheim, and his opinions of Midgard television shows, which, for some reason, he followed religiously. (Can I say a god did something religiously?)

“Giants!” He shook his head in disgust. “After all these centuries, you’d think they would learn to stop invading Midgard. But no! They’re like the...what is it? The League of Assassins in *Arrow*! They just keep coming back! As if I would let anything happen to humans! You guys are my favorite species!”

He patted my cheek. Fortunately, he had taken off his iron gloves, or he would’ve broken my jaw. Unfortunately, he hadn’t washed his hands after gutting the goats.

Hearthstone sat at the fire, nibbling on a piece of Marvin haunch. He was getting some of his strength back, though every time I looked at him I had to force myself not to sob. I wanted to hug the poor guy, bake him a batch of cookies, and tell him how sorry I was about his crappy childhood, but I knew he wouldn’t want pity. He wouldn’t want me to start treating him differently.

Still...the empty cup runestone weighed heavily in my coat pocket.

Sam stayed at the edge of the fire, as far from Thor as she could get. She said as little as possible and made no sudden movements, which meant that most of Thor’s attention was on me.

Everything the thunder god did, he did with gusto. He loved cooking his goats. He loved eating and drinking mead. He loved telling stories. And he loved farting. Boy, did he love farting. When he got excited, sparks of electricity flew from his hands, his ears, and...well, I’ll leave the rest to your imagination.

Unlike his movie version, there was nothing polished about Thor. His face was handsome in a beat-up way, like he’d spent years in the boxing ring. His chain mail was filthy. His leather jerkin and trousers had worn to the color of dirty snow. Tattoos covered his muscular arms. On his left biceps, SIF was inscribed inside a heart. Around his right forearm coiled a stylized World Serpent. Across his knuckles on either hand, in block letters, were the names MAGNI and MODI. At first I was nervous about the name *Magni*, because it was so close to *Magnus*—the last thing I wanted was my name printed across the thunder god’s fist—but Sam assured me, quietly, that it was a totally different name.

Thor regaled me with his theories about a hypothetical death match between Daryl from *The Walking Dead* and Mike from *Breaking Bad*. Back when I was hanging out on the sidewalks of Boston, I would’ve been happy to talk TV for hours just to pass the time, but now I had a quest looming.

We'd lost a whole day to unconsciousness. Speculating on the new fall lineup wasn't going to mean much if the world was consumed in flames three days from now.

Still, Thor was having so much fun it was hard to change the subject.

"So what do you think?" he asked. "Best villain in an ongoing series?"

"Uh...wow, tough one." I pointed at his knuckles. "Who are Magni and Modi?"

"My sons!" Thor beamed. With the goat grease in his beard and the random electrical sparks flying from his fingers, I was worried he might set himself on fire. "I've got a lot of sons, of course, but they're my favorites."

"Yeah?" I asked. "How old are they?"

He frowned. "Ah, this is embarrassing, but I'm not sure. They might not even be born yet."

"How—?"

"Magnus," Sam interrupted, "Lord Thor's two sons Magni and Modi are fated to survive Ragnarok. Their names are spoken in the prophecies of the Norns."

"That's right!" Thor leaned toward Sam. "Who are you again?"

"Uh...Sam, my lord."

"You have a familiar aura, girl." The god furrowed his red eyebrows.  
"Why is that?"

"I was a Valkyrie...?" Sam inched backward.

"Oh. Maybe that's it." Thor shrugged. "You'll have to excuse me. I've been on three thousand five hundred and six consecutive deployments to the eastern front, keeping the giants at bay. I get a little jumpy sometimes."

Hearthstone signed, *And gassy.*

Thor belched. "What did the elf say? I do not speak Gesticulation."

"Um, he was wondering how you keep current on television," I said, "seeing as you're out in the field so much."

Thor laughed. "I have to do something to keep myself sane!"

Hearthstone signed: *How's that working out for you?*

"The elf agrees!" Thor guessed. "I can watch my shows anywhere, or at least I could. Among its many other powers, my hammer Mjolnir got full bars of service and HD resolution in any of the Nine Worlds!"

"Got, past tense?" Sam asked.

Thor cleared his throat loudly. "But enough about television! How's that goat meat? You didn't break any bones, did you?"

Sam and I exchanged looks. When we'd first introduced ourselves to the god, I'd found it strange that Thor didn't have his hammer. It was sort of his signature weapon. I'd figured maybe it was just in disguise, like my sword. Now I was starting to wonder. His piercing bloodshot gaze made me think it might be dangerous to ask, though.

"Uh, no, sir," I said. "We didn't break any bones. Just theoretically, what would happen if we did?"

"The goats would be resurrected with that damage," he said. "Which would take a long time to heal and be very annoying. Then I'd either have to kill you or make you my slave forever."

Hearthstone signed, *This god is a freak.*

"You're right, Mr. Elf," Thor said. "It is a fair and just punishment! That's how I got my regular manservant, Thjalfi." Thor shook his head. "Poor kid. These deployments were starting to get to him. I had to grant him a furlough. I really *could* use another slave..." He studied me appraisingly.

"So..." I set aside my goat meat. "How did you end up in the river, and why was that giantess trying to drown you?"

"Oh, her." Thor glowered at the neighborhood-size corpse in the middle of the icy swamp. "She's a daughter of Geirrod, one of my old enemies. I hate that guy. He's always sending his daughters to kill me." He gestured toward the cliffs. "I was heading to his fortress to see if—Well, no matter. Thank you for the assist. That was Frey's sword, wasn't it?"

"Yes. Jack's around here somewhere." I whistled. Jack came hovering over.

"Hello, Thor," said the sword. "Long time no see."

"Ha!" The god clapped his hands in delight. "I thought I recognized you. But isn't your name Sumarbrander? Why did the human call you Jorvik?"

"Jack," the sword corrected.

"Yak."

"No," the sword said patiently. "Jack, with the English *jay* sound."

"Okay, fine. Well, nice job with the giantess."

"You know what they say." Jack sounded smug. "The bigger they are, the easier it is to fly up their nasal cavity."

"True," Thor said. "But I thought you were lost. How did you come to be with these strange folk?"

*He calls us strange?* Hearthstone signed.

“Lord Thor,” Sam said, “we actually came here looking for you. We need your help, as Magnus will now explain.” She stared at me like, *If he knows what’s good for him.*

I told Thor about the Norns’ prophecy—nine days hence, sun going east, Surt explodes everything, Fenris Wolf, nasty teeth, eats world, et cetera.

Thor became agitated. Sparks flew from his elbows. He rose and paced around the fire, occasionally punching nearby trees.

“You want me to tell you where the island is,” he deduced.

“That would be great,” I said.

“But I can’t,” Thor muttered to himself. “I can’t be sending random mortals on wolf-watching tours. Too dangerous. But Ragnarok. Not ready. No. Not unless—” He froze, then turned toward us with an eager gleam in his eyes. “Perhaps *that’s* why you’re here.”

*I do not like this,* Hearthstone signed.

Thor nodded. “The elf agrees! You have come to assist me!”

“Exactly!” said Jack, humming with excitement. “Let’s do it, whatever it is!”

I had a sudden desire to hide behind the goat carcasses. Anything the god of thunder and the Sword of Summer agreed on, I didn’t want to be part of.

Sam placed her ax at her side, as if she anticipated needing it soon. “Let me guess, Lord Thor: you’ve lost your hammer again.”

“Now, I did *not* say that!” Thor wagged a finger at her. “You did *not* hear that from me. Because if that were true, hypothetically speaking, and if word got out, the giants would invade Midgard immediately! You mortals don’t realize how often I keep you safe. My reputation alone makes most giants too afraid to attack your world.”

“Back up,” I said. “What did Sam mean by *again*? You’ve lost your hammer before?”

“Once,” Thor said. “Okay, twice. Three times if you count this time, which you shouldn’t, because I am not admitting that the hammer is missing.”

“Right...” I said. “So how did you lose it?”

“I don’t know!” Thor started to pace again, his long red hair sparking and popping. “It was just like...*Poof!* I tried retracing my steps. I tried the

Find My Hammer app, but it doesn't work!"

"Isn't your hammer the most powerful weapon in the universe?" I asked.

"Yes!"

"And I thought it was so heavy nobody except you could pick it up."

"True. Even *I* need my iron gloves of strength to lift it! But giants are tricky. They're big and strong and they have magic. With them, many impossible things are possible."

I thought about the eagle Big Boy and how easily he'd suckered me.  
"Yeah, I get it. Is that why you were going to A-Rod's?"

"Geirrod's," Thor corrected. "And, yes. He's a likely suspect. Even if he doesn't have it, he might know who does. Besides, without my hammer I can't watch my shows. I'm a season behind on *Sherlock* and it's killing me! I was ready to go to Geirrod's fortress myself, but I'm very glad you volunteered to go for me!"

*We did?* Hearthstone asked.

"That's the spirit, Mr. Elf! I'm glad you are ready to die for my cause!"

*Really not,* Hearth signed.

"Just go to Geirrod's fortress and check for my hammer. Of course it's important you don't let on that it is missing. If Geirrod *doesn't* have it, we don't want him to know that *I* don't have it. But, you know, if he doesn't have it, obviously ask him if he knows who does, without actually admitting that it's missing."

Samirah pressed her fingers to her temples. "I'm getting a headache. Lord Thor, how are we supposed to find your hammer if we can't mention \_\_\_\_\_"

"You'll figure it out!" he said. "You humans are a clever bunch. Then, once you've determined the truth, I will know you are worthy of facing Fenris Wolf. I'll give you the location of his island and you can stop Ragnarok. You help me, I help you."

It sounded more like *You help me, then you help me some more*, but I doubted there was a polite way to decline without getting an iron gauntlet in my teeth.

Sam must have been thinking the same thing. Her face turned roughly the same shade of green as her hijab. "Lord Thor," she said, "invading a giant's fortress with only three people would be..."

*Suicidal,* Hearthstone suggested. *Stupid.*

“Difficult,” Sam said.

Just then, a nearby pine tree shuddered. Blitzen dropped from the branches and landed waist-deep in a pile of slush.

Hearthstone scrambled over and helped him to his feet.

“Thanks, buddy,” Blitz said. “Stupid tree travel. Where—?”

“Is this a friend of yours?” Thor raised one ironclad fist. “Or should I —”

“No! I mean, yes, he’s a friend. Blitzen, Thor. Thor, Blitzen.”

“*The Thor?*” Blitzen bowed so low it looked like he was trying to avoid an air strike. “Honored. Seriously. Hi. Wow.”

“Well, then!” The thunder god grinned. “You have *four* people to storm the giant’s citadel! Friend dwarf, help yourself to my goat meat and my fire. As for me, after being stuck in that river so long, I’m going to turn in early. In the morning, you all can set off to find my hammer, which of course is not officially missing!”

Thor tromped over to his bed of furs, threw himself down, and began snoring with as much gusto as he’d been farting.

Blitzen frowned at me. “What have you gotten us into?”

“Long story,” I said. “Here, have some Marvin.”



## We Have the Talk-About-Turning-Into-Horseflies Chat

HEARTHSTONE WENT to sleep first, mostly because he was the only one who *could* sleep with Thor's snoring. Since the god had crashed outside, Hearthstone commandeered the two-man tent. He crawled inside and promptly collapsed.

The rest of us stayed up and talked around the campfire. At first I was worried we might wake Thor, but I soon realized we could've tap-danced around his head, banged gongs, shouted his name, and set off large explosions, and he would've slept right through it.

I wondered if that was how he had lost his hammer. The giants could've waited until he was asleep, backed up a couple of industrial cranes, and done the job easy.

As night fell, I was grateful for the fire. The darkness was more complete than in the wildest places my mom and I had ever camped. Wolves howled in the forest, which gave me a bad case of the shivers. Wind moaned through the canyons like a chorus of zombies.

I mentioned this to Blitzen, but he set me straight.

"No, kid," he said. "Norse zombies are called *draugr*. They move silently. You'd never hear them coming."

"Thanks," I said. "That's a huge relief."

Blitzen stirred his cup of goat stew, though he didn't seem interested in tasting it. He'd changed into a blue wool suit with a cream-colored trench coat, perhaps so he could blend in with the Jotunheim snow in the most stylish way possible. He'd also brought each of us a new supply pack filled with fresh winter clothes, which of course he'd sized perfectly just by guessing. Sometimes it pays to have a friend who's a thoughtful clotheshorse.

Blitz explained how he'd delivered the earrings to his mother, then gotten detained in Folkvanger for various duties as Freya's representative: judging an oyster bake, refereeing a volleyball game, serving as guest of honor at the 678th annual ukulele festival.

"It was murder," he said. "Mom liked the earrings. Didn't ask how I got them. Didn't want to hear about the contest with Junior. She just said, 'Oh, don't you wish you could do work like this, Blitzen?'" From his coat pocket, he pulled the rope Andskoti. The ball of silk glowed silver like a miniature moon. "I hope this was worth it."

"Hey," I told him, "what you did in that contest? I've never seen anybody work that hard. You poured your heart and soul into that Expando-Duck. And the bulletproof tie? The chain mail vest? Just wait. We'll get you an endorsement deal with Thor, and you'll start a fashion trend."

"Magnus is right," Sam said. "Well, maybe not about the endorsement deal with Thor—but you have real talent, Blitzen. If Freya and the other dwarves don't see it, that's their problem. Without you, we never would've gotten this far."

"You mean you wouldn't have gotten kicked out of the Valkyries; Magnus wouldn't have died; we wouldn't have half the gods mad at us; fire giants and einherjar wouldn't be out to kill us; and we wouldn't be sitting in the wilderness of Jotunheim with a snoring god?"

"Exactly," Sam said. "Life is good."

Blitzen snorted, but I was happy to see a little spark of humor in his eyes. "Yeah, okay. I'm going to sleep. I'll need it if we're going to storm a giant's castle in the morning."

He crawled into the tent and muttered to Hearthstone, "Make some room, you tent hog!" Then he draped his overcoat across the elf, which I thought was kind of sweet.

Sam sat cross-legged in her jeans and new snow jacket, her hood pulled over her headscarf. Snow had started to fall—big fluffy flakes that

dissolved and hissed in the flames.

“Speaking of the contest in Dwarfland,” I said, “we never got to talk about the horsefly—”

“Hush.” Sam glanced apprehensively at Thor. “Certain people aren’t keen on my father, or my father’s children.”

“Certain people are snoring like a chain saw.”

“Still...” She studied her hand as if making sure it hadn’t changed. “I promised myself I wouldn’t shape-shift, and in the last week I’ve done it twice. The first time...well, the stag was after us on the World Tree. I turned into a deer to distract it so Hearthstone could get away. I didn’t think I had a choice.”

I nodded. “And the second time, you turned into the horsefly to help Blitzen. Those are both great reasons. Besides, shape-shifting is an awesome power. Why wouldn’t you want to use it?”

The firelight made her irises almost as red as Surt’s. “Magnus, true shape-shifting isn’t like my hijab’s camouflage. Shape-shifting doesn’t just change your appearance. It changes *you*. Every time I do it, I feel...I feel more of my father’s nature trying to take hold of me. He’s fluid, unpredictable, untrustworthy—I don’t want to be like that.”

I gestured at Thor. “You could have *him* for a dad—a farting giant with goat grease in his beard and tattoos on his knuckles. Then everybody in Valhalla would love you.”

I could tell she was trying not to smile. “You are *very* bad. Thor is an important god.”

“No doubt. So is Frey, supposedly, but I’ve never met him. At least your dad is kind of charming, and he has a sense of humor. He may be a sociopath, but—”

“Wait.” Sam’s voice tightened. “You talk as if you’ve met him.”

“I...I kind of walked right into that, didn’t I? Truth is, he’s been in a few of my near-death experiences.”

I told Sam about the dreams: Loki’s warnings, his promises, his suggestion that I take the sword to my Uncle Randolph and forget about the quest.

Sam listened. I couldn’t tell if she was angry or shocked or both.

“So,” she said, “you didn’t tell me this earlier because you didn’t trust me?”

“Maybe at first. Later, I just—I wasn’t sure what to do. Your dad is kind of unsettling.”

She tossed a twig into the flames and watched it burn. “You can’t do what my dad suggests, no matter what he promises. We have to face Surt. We’ll need the sword.”

I remembered my dream of the burning throne—the dark face floating in the smoke, the voice with the heat of a flamethrower. *YOU AND YOUR FRIENDS WILL BE MY TINDER. YOU WILL START THE FIRE THAT BURNS THE NINE WORLDS.*

I looked around for Jack, but I didn’t see him. The sword had volunteered to hover the perimeter “on patrol,” as he put it. He suggested I wait until the last possible minute to reclaim him, since once I did, I would pass out instantly from the strain of murdering a giantess by nostrilcide.

Snow continued to fall, steaming against the stones around the fire pit. I thought about our near-lunch in the food court of the Transportation Building, how nervous Sam had acted around Amir. That seemed like a thousand years ago.

“When we were on Harald’s boat,” I recalled, “you said your family had a long history with all the Norse god stuff. How? You said your grandparents came from Iraq...?”

She threw another stick into the flames. “Vikings were traders, Magnus. They traveled everywhere. They got all the way to America. It shouldn’t be a surprise they got to the Middle East, too. Arabic coins have been found in Norway. The best Viking swords were modeled after Damascus steel.”

“But *your* family... You’ve got a more personal connection?”

She nodded. “Back in medieval times, some of the Vikings settled in Russia. They called themselves the Rus. That’s where the word *Russian* comes from. Anyway, the Caliph—the big king down in Baghdad—he sent an ambassador north to find out more about the Vikings, set up trade routes with them, that kind of stuff. The ambassador’s name was Ahmed ibn-Fadlan ibn-al-Abbas.”

“Fadlan like Fadlan’s Falafel. Al-Abbas like—”

“Right. Like me. Al-Abbas means *of the lion*. That’s my branch of the clan. Anyway”—she pulled a sleeping bag out of her backpack—“this guy Ibn Fadlan kept a journal about his time with the Vikings. It’s one of the only written sources about what the Norse were like back then. Ever since, my family and the Vikings have been intertwined. Over the centuries, my

relatives have racked up a lot of weird encounters with...supernatural beings. Maybe that's why my mother wasn't too surprised when she found out who my dad really was." She spread out her sleeping bag next to the fire. "And that's why Samirah al-Abbas is fated never to have a normal life. The end."

"*Normal life*," I mused. "I don't even know what that means anymore."

She looked like she wanted to say something, then changed her mind. "I'm going to sleep."

I had a weird vision of our ancestors, medieval Chase and medieval al-Abbas, sitting around a campfire in Russia twelve hundred years ago, comparing notes on how the Norse gods had messed up their lives, maybe with Thor snoring on a bed of furs nearby. Sam's family might be intertwined with the gods, but as my Valkyrie she was also intertwined with my family now.

"We'll figure things out," I promised. "I don't know about *normal*, but I'll do everything I can to help you get what you want—a place in the Valkyries again, your marriage with Amir, a pilot's license. Whatever it takes."

She stared at me as if processing the words from another language.

"What?" I asked. "Do I have goat blood on my face?"

"No. Well, yes, you do have goat blood on your face. But that's not...I was just trying to remember the last time anybody said something that nice to me."

"If you want, I'll go back to insulting you tomorrow," I said. "For now, get some sleep. Sweet dreams."

Sam curled up by the fire. Snow settled lightly on the sleeve of her coat. "Thank you, Magnus. But no dreams, please. I don't want to dream in Jotunheim."



## I Got the Horse Right Here. His Name Is Stanley

THOR WAS STILL SNORING like a defective wood chipper when we were ready to leave the next morning. That's really saying something, since I had slept forever. Jack the sword had not been kidding about the effect of killing the giantess. As soon as I'd reclaimed the sword after Sam fell asleep, I had passed out instantly.

At least I hadn't lost a full twenty-four hours this time. With Fenris Wolf appearing in only two more days, I couldn't afford any more long naps. I wondered if maybe, just maybe, I was growing more resilient as I became bonded to the sword. I hoped so, but I still felt like I'd been flattened under a rolling pin all night.

We packed up our gear and ate a cold breakfast of MORNING, MAGGOT! energy bars from Blitz's supply bags (yum). Then Hearthstone nestled the severed heads of the two still-dead goats in Thor's arms like teddy bears. Never let it be said that elves don't have a sense of humor.

I looked down at the drool turning to ice in Thor's beard. "And to think that the defense of Nine Worlds rests on this god."

"Let's get going," Blitzen muttered. "I don't want to be around when he wakes up with Otis and Marvin."

The dead giantess proved helpful. We climbed over her to cross the icy swamp. Then we discovered that we could scale her left foot to reach the first ledge in the side of the cliff.

Once we got that far, I stared up at the remaining five hundred meters of sheer icy rock. “Awesome. Now the real fun begins.”

“Wish I could still fly,” Sam murmured.

I imagined she *could* fly, with a little shape-shifting, but after our conversation last night, I decided against mentioning that.

Blitz handed his pack to Hearthstone, then wriggled his stubby fingers. “Don’t worry, kids. You’re climbing with a dwarf today.”

I frowned. “You’re a mountaineer now as well as a master of fashion?”

“I told you, kid, dwarves were formed from maggots that burrowed through Ymir’s flesh.”

“And you seem strangely proud of it.”

“Rock to us is like...well, not rock.” He punched the side of the cliff. Rather than breaking his fist, he left an indentation just the right size for a handhold. “I’m not saying it’ll be fast or easy. It takes me a lot of effort to shape rock. But we can do it.”

I glanced at Sam. “Did you know dwarves could punch through stone?”

“Nope. That’s new to me.”

Hearthstone signed, *Use the magic rope? Rather not fall to death.*

I shuddered. I couldn’t think about the rope Andskoti without thinking about the Wolf, and I didn’t like thinking about the Wolf. “We need that rope to bind Fenris, right? I don’t want to do anything that might weaken it.”

“Don’t worry, kid.” Blitz brought out the silken cord. “This rope can’t be weakened. And Hearthstone’s right. We might as well tie it to one another for safety.”

“That way if we fall,” Sam said, “we’ll fall together.”

“Sold,” I said, trying to tamp down my anxiety. “I love dying with friends.”

We got hitched (so to speak) and followed our intrepid rock-shaping, fashion-conscious guide up the side of Mount You-Gotta-Be-Kidding-Me.

I’d heard homeless military vets describe war as ninety-five percent boredom and five percent terror. Climbing the cliff was more like five percent terror and ninety-five percent excruciating pain. My arms shook. My legs wobbled. Every time I looked down I wanted to cry or throw up.

Despite the handholds and footholds Blitzen made, the wind almost knocked me off several times. There was nothing I could do except keep going.

I knew for certain that my Valhalla-enhanced strength was the only thing keeping me alive. Magnus 1.0 would have fallen to his death. I didn't understand how Hearthstone could manage, bringing up the end of the rope, but he did. And Sam...demigod or not, she didn't have the advantage of being an einherji. Yet she didn't complain, didn't waver, didn't slip—which was good, since she was climbing right above me.

Finally, as the sky began to darken, we reached the top. Down in the canyon we'd come from, the body of the giantess was so small it looked like a normal-sized body. The river glittered in the gloom. If Thor's camp was still there, I saw no sign of it.

In the other direction, Jotunheim spread out like an electron microscope landscape—impossibly jagged peaks, crystalline cliffs, ravines filled with ovoid clouds like floating bacteria.

The good news: I could see the giant's fortress. Across a mile-wide chasm, windows glowed red in the side of a mountain. Towers rose from the summit as if they'd been shaped from the rock dwarven-style rather than built.

The bad news: did I mention the mile-wide chasm? The cliff top where we were standing was no more than a narrow plateau. The drop on the other side was just as precipitous as the one we'd climbed.

Considering it had taken us all day to get this far, I figured we'd reach the castle in another six months, easy. Unfortunately, it was Monday evening and the Wolf's island was supposed to rise on Wednesday.

"Let's camp here tonight," Blitzen said. "Maybe in the morning we'll see a better way across."

Despite our time crunch, nobody argued. We were all so tired we collapsed.

As is so often the case, in the fresh light of morning our situation looked much worse.

There were no stairs, no convenient zip lines, no direct commuter flights to Geirrod's fortress. I was about to risk an ax in the face by suggesting that

Sam shape-shift—maybe change into a giant sugar glider and carry us across—when Hearthstone signed: *Have an idea.*

He pulled out a runestone:



“M,” I said.

He shook his head then spelled out the name: *E-H-W-A-Z*.

“Right,” I said. “Because calling it *M* would be too easy.”

Sam plucked the stone from Hearth’s palm. “I know this one. It symbolizes a horse, right? The shape is like a saddle.”

I squinted at the rune. The wind was so cold and harsh that I had a hard time thinking imaginatively, but the symbol still looked like an M to me.

“How does this help us?”

Hearthstone signed: *Means horse, transportation. Maybe a way to go*—he pointed to the castle.

Blitzen tugged his beard. “Sounds like powerful magic. Have you tried it before?”

Hearthstone shook his head. *Don’t worry. I can do it.*

“I know you can,” said Blitz. “But you’ve already taxed yourself to the limit several times.”

*Be fine,* Hearth insisted.

“I don’t see that we have much choice,” I said, “since we don’t have anyone who can grow wings.”

“I will push you off this mountain,” Sam warned.

“All right,” Blitzen decided, “let’s try it. I mean the rune, not pushing Magnus off the mountain. Maybe Hearth can summon a helicopter.”

“Geirrod would hear a helicopter,” I said. “And probably throw rocks at us. And kill us.”

“Well, then,” Blitzen said, “perhaps a stealth helicopter. Hearthstone, do your stuff!”

Sam returned the stone. Hearth passed his hand over it, moving his lips as if imagining how the syllables might sound.

The runestone burst into dust. Hearthstone stared at the white powder trickling through his fingers.

“I’m guessing it wasn’t supposed to do that?” I asked.

“Guys.” Sam’s voice was so small it was almost lost in the wind.

She pointed up, where a gray shape was hurtling out of the clouds. It moved so fast and blended with the sky so well, I didn't realize what the creature was until it was almost on top of us—a stallion twice the size of a normal horse, his coat rippling like liquid steel, his white mane billowing, his eyes glittering black.

The stallion had no wings, but he galloped through the air as easily as if he were running down a gentle slope. Only when he landed next to us did I notice he had four, five, six...*eight* legs—a pair in each place where a normal horse would have one, kind of like dual wheels on a pickup truck.

I turned to Hearthstone. "Dude, when you summon a horse, you don't mess around."

Hearthstone grinned. Then his eyes rolled up in his head and he fell forward. I managed to catch him and ease him to the ground while Blitzen and Sam moved warily around the stallion.

"It—it c-can't be," Blitzen stammered.

"One of Sleipnir's offspring?" Sam wondered. "Gods, what a magnificent animal."

The horse nuzzled her hand, clearly pleased with the compliment.

I moved toward him, fascinated by his intelligent eyes and his regal stance. The stallion gave the word *horsepower* a new meaning. He radiated strength.

"Is somebody going to introduce me?" I asked.

Sam shook herself out of her reverie. "I...I don't know who he is. He looks like Sleipnir, Odin's steed, but this can't be him. Only Odin can summon him. I'm guessing this is one of Sleipnir's sons."

"Well, he's amazing." I extended my hand. The horse brushed his lips against my fingers. "He's friendly. And he's definitely big enough to carry us all across the chasm. Would you be okay with that, buddy?"

The horse nickered, like, *Uh, duh, that's why I'm here.*

"The eight legs are"—I was about to say weird but changed my mind—"awesome. How did that happen?"

Blitzen glanced at Sam. "Sleipnir was one of Loki's children. They tend to come out...interesting."

I smiled. "So this horse is your nephew, Sam?"

She glared at me. "Let's not go there."

"How did your dad father a horse?"

Blitzen coughed. "Actually, Loki was Sleipnir's mother."

“What—?”

“Let’s *definitely* not go there,” Sam warned.

I filed that away for later research. “Okay, Mr. Horse, since we don’t know your name, I’m going to call you Stanley, because you look like a Stanley. That okay with you?”

The horse seemed to shrug, which was good enough for me.

We draped Hearthstone over Stanley’s extra-long back like a sack of elfish potatoes. The rest of us climbed on.

“We’re going to that castle over there, Stanley,” I told the stallion.

“Looking for a quiet entrance. That work for you?”

The horse whinnied. I was pretty sure he was warning me to hold on.

I wondered what exactly I should hold on *to*, since there were no reins and no saddle. Then the stallion pawed the rocks with his front four hooves, leaped off the side of the cliff, and plummeted straight down.

And we all died.



## How to Kill Giants Politely

JUST KIDDING THIS TIME.

It only *felt* like we were going to die.

The horse must have enjoyed the feeling of free fall. I didn't. I grabbed his neck and screamed in terror (which was not very stealthy). Meanwhile, Blitzen grabbed my waist, and behind him Sam somehow stayed on board while managing to keep Hearthstone from slipping into oblivion.

The fall felt like hours, though it probably lasted only a second or two. During that time I thought of several more colorful names for Stanley. Finally he churned his eight legs like locomotive wheels. We leveled out and began to climb.

Stanley punched through a cloud, zigzagged along the face of the mountain, and landed on a window ledge near the top of the fortress. I dismounted, my legs shaking, then helped the others with Hearthstone.

The ledge was so wide, the four of us plus the horse could stand in one corner and seem no bigger than mice. The window had no glass (probably because there wasn't that much glass in the world), but Stanley had landed us behind a panel of gathered curtain, so nobody inside could've seen us, even if they were randomly scanning the window for mice.

"Thanks, buddy," I told Stanley. "That was horrifying. I mean, great."

Stanley nickered. He gave me an affectionate nip, then disappeared in a burst of dust. On the windowsill where he'd been standing was the *ehwaz* runestone.

"He seemed to like me," I noted.

Blitzen slid down next to Hearthstone and said, "Eep."

Only Sam didn't seem ruffled. In fact, she seemed exhilarated. Her eyes sparkled and she couldn't stop smiling. I guess she really *did* love flying, even if it was a near-death free fall on an eight-legged horse.

"Of course Stanley liked you." She picked up the runestone. "Horses are one of Frey's sacred animals."

"Huh." I thought about my experiences with the Boston mounted police that patrolled the Public Garden. The horses always seemed friendly, even if their riders weren't. One time, when a mounted officer had started to question me, his horse had suddenly taken off, galloping toward the nearest low-hanging tree branch.

"I've always liked horses," I said.

"Frey's temples kept their own herds," Sam told me. "No mortal was allowed to ride them without the god's permission."

"Well, I wish Stanley had asked my permission before leaving," I said. "We have no exit strategy, and Hearthstone doesn't look like he's going to be casting more spells anytime soon."

The elf had regained consciousness...sort of. He leaned against Blitz, giggling silently and making random signs like, *Butterfly. Pop. Yippee.* Blitzen clutched his stomach and stared into space as if he were thinking of interesting ways to die.

Sam and I crept to the edge of the curtain. We peeked around it and found we were at ceiling level of a stadium-size room. In the hearth burned a fire as big as an urban riot. The only exit was a closed wooden door on the far wall. In the center of the room, seated at a stone table, two giantesses were having dinner, ripping into a carcass that reminded me of the roast beast in Valhalla's dining hall.

The giantesses didn't look as tall as the dead one back in the river, though it was hard to be sure. In Jotunheim, proportions made no sense. My eyes felt like they were constantly adjusting to different funhouse mirrors.

Sam nudged my arm. "Look."

She pointed to a birdcage suspended from the ceiling, hanging just about eye-level to us. Inside the cage, waddling around on a bed of straw

and looking miserable, was a white swan.

“That’s a Valkyrie,” Sam said.

“How can you be sure?”

“I just am. Not only that...I’m pretty sure it’s Gunilla.”

I shuddered. “What would she be doing here?”

“Looking for us. Valkyries are excellent trackers. I imagine she got here before we did and...” Sam mimed a hand snatching something out of the air.

“So...do we leave her?”

“For the giants to eat? Of course not.”

“She set you up. She got you kicked out of the Valkyries.”

“She’s still my captain,” Sam said. “She...well, she has her reasons for mistrusting me. A few centuries ago, there was a son of Loki who made it into Valhalla.”

“He and Gunilla fell in love,” I guessed. “I kind of got that impression when she was taking me on a tour of the hotel.”

Sam nodded. “The son of Loki betrayed her. Turned out he *was* a spy for my dad. Broke her heart. Well...you get the picture. Anyway, I’m not going to leave her to die.”

I sighed. “Okay.”

I pulled off my pendant.

Jack the sword hummed to life.

“About time,” he said. “What did I miss yesterday?”

“Bunch of climbing,” I told him. “Now we’re looking at two more giantesses. How do you feel about flying up their nostrils?”

The sword tugged at my hand, his blade peeking around the corner of the curtain. “Dude, we’re on their windowsill. We’ve technically crossed the threshold of the giants’ home.”

“So?”

“So you have to follow the rules! Killing them in their home without provocation would be rude!”

“Right,” I said. “We wouldn’t want to kill them rudely.”

“Hey, *señor*, guest rights and host rights are important magic protocols. They keep situations from escalating.”

Blitzen groaned in the corner. “The sword has a point, kid. And, no, that wasn’t a joke. We should go in, claim guest rights, and barter for what we need. If the giants try to kill us, *then* we can attack.”

Hearthstone hiccupped, grinned, and signed: *Washing machine*.

Sam shook her head. “You two are in no condition to go anywhere. Blitz, stay here and watch Hearthstone. Magnus and I will go in, find Thor’s hammer, and free Gunilla. If things go wrong, it’ll be up to you two to figure out how to rescue us.”

“But—” Blitzen put his fist over his mouth and stifled an *urp*. “Yeah... okay. How are you guys going to get down there?”

Sam peered over the ledge. “We’ll use your magic rope to reach the floor. Then we’ll walk up to the giants and introduce ourselves.”

“I hate this plan,” I said. “Let’s do it.”



## Why You Should Not Use a Steak Knife as a Diving Board

RAPPELLING DOWN THE WALL was the easy part.

When we reached the bottom, I started having serious doubts. The giantesses were definitely smaller than their dead sister—maybe fifty feet tall. If I'd been asked to wrestle one of their big toes, I could've won no problem. Other than that, I didn't like my chances.

"I feel like Jack up the beanstalk," I muttered.

Sam laughed under her breath. "Where do you think that story comes from? It's a cultural memory—a watered-down account of what happens when humans blunder into Jotunheim."

"Super."

The sword buzzed in my hand. "Besides, you can't be Jack. I'm Jack." I couldn't argue with that logic.

We navigated across the stone floor, through a wasteland of dust bunnies, food scraps, and grease puddles.

The fireplace was so hot my clothes steamed. My hair crackled. The smell of the giants' body odor—a combination of wet clay and sour meat—was almost as deadly as a sword flying up my nose.

We got within shouting distance of the dining table, but the two giantesses still hadn't noticed us. They both wore sandals, size 120 leather

dresses, and Flintstones-style necklaces made from polished boulders. Their stringy black hair was woven into pigtails. Their gray faces were hideously painted with rouge and lipstick. I didn't have my fashion advisor Blitzen with me, but I guessed the giant sisters were dolled up for a girls' night out, even though it was barely lunchtime.

"Ready?" Sam asked me.

The answer was no, but I took a deep breath and yelled, "Hello!"

The giantesses kept chatting, banging their cups, and chomping their meat.

I tried again. "YO!"

The big ladies froze. They scanned the room. Finally the one on the left spotted us. She burst out laughing, spraying bits of mead and meat. "More humans! I don't believe it!"

The other giantess leaned over. "Is that another Valkyrie? And..." She sniffed the air. "The boy is an einherji. Perfect! I was just wondering what we'd have for dessert."

"We claim guest rights!" I yelled.

The giantess on the left made a sour face. "Now, why did you have to go and do that?"

"We want to barter." I pointed to the birdcage, now so far above us I could only see its rusted base hovering like a moon. "For that swan's freedom. And also...possibly, you know, if you have any stolen weapons lying around. Like, I don't know, a hammer or something."

"Smooth," Sam muttered.

The giantesses looked at each other like they were trying not to giggle. They'd obviously been hitting the mead pretty hard.

"Very well," said the giantess on the left. "I am Gjalp. This is my sister Griep. We agree to host you while we barter. What are your names?"

"I am Magnus, son of Natalie," I said. "And this is—"

"Samirah, daughter of Ayesha," said Sam.

"You are welcome in the house of our father, Geirrod," said Gjalp. "But I can barely hear you down there. Do you mind if I put you in a chair?"

"Uh, okay," I said.

The other sister, Griep, snatched us up like toys. She set us on an empty chair, its seat the size of a living room. The tabletop was still a good five feet above my head.

“Oh, dear,” Griep said. “That’s still too low. May I raise your chair for you?”

Sam started to say, “Magnus—”

I blurted out, “Sure.”

With a shriek of glee, Griep picked up our chair and thrust it over her head. If not for the backrest, Sam and I would’ve been smashed flat against the ceiling. As it was, we got knocked off our feet and showered in plaster.

Griep put down the chair. It took a moment for my eyeballs to stop rattling. Then I saw the giantesses’ scowling faces looming over us.

“It didn’t work,” Griep said, with obvious disappointment.

“Of course it didn’t work,” Gjalp growled. “You *never* do that trick right. I told you, it has to be something without a back, like a stool. And we should have installed those spikes in the ceiling.”

“You were trying to kill us!” I said. “That can’t be in the rules for good hosts.”

“Kill you?” Gjalp looked offended. “That’s an absolutely baseless accusation. My sister only did as you requested. She asked your permission to raise the chair.”

“You just said it was a trick.”

“Did I?” Gjalp blinked. Up close, her heavily mascaraed lashes looked like the obstacle course for a mud run. “Pretty sure I didn’t.”

I looked at the Sword of Summer, which was still in my hand. “Jack, have they broken the host rules yet? Because trying to kill us seems kinda borderline.”

“Not unless they admit their intent,” Jack said. “And they’re saying it was an accident.”

The giantesses both straightened.

“A talking sword?” Gjalp said. “Well now, that’s interesting.”

“You sure I can’t raise your chair for you again?” Griep offered. “I could run to the kitchen and get a stool. It’s no trouble.”

“Honored hosts,” Sam said, her voice shaky, “please put us gently and safely on the top of your table, so we may barter with you.”

Griep muttered unhappily, but she did as Sam asked. The giantess deposited us next to her fork and knife, which were roughly the same size as me. Her mug would’ve made a fine water tower for a rural town. I just hoped it wasn’t named Boom Daddy.

“So...” Griep plopped back in her chair. “You want freedom for the swan? You’ll have to wait until our father gets home to negotiate terms. She is his prisoner, not ours.”

“She’s a Valkyrie, of course,” Gjalp added. “Flew in our window last night. She refuses to show her true form. Thinks she can fool us by staying in that silly swan costume, but Dad is too clever for her.”

“Bummer,” I said. “Well, we tried.”

“Magnus...” Sam chided. “Gracious hosts, will you at least consent not to kill the swan until we’ve had a chance to speak with Geirrod?”

Gjalp shrugged. “Like I said, her fate is up to Dad. He might let her go if you surrendered yourselves in exchange, but I don’t know. We need *something* spicy for the stew tonight.”

“Let’s put a pin in that,” I said.

“Which is only an expression,” Sam added hastily. “By no means is my friend granting you permission to put a pin in anything, especially us.”

“Nice save,” I told her.

Sam gave me a *you’re-such-an-idiot* look. I was getting used to that.

Gjalp crossed her arms, forming a new mesa against her chest. “You said you also wanted to barter for a stolen weapon?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Something thunder-goddish, if you have it—not that any particular thunder god is missing any particular weapon.”

Griep cackled. “Oh, we have something like that...something that belongs to Thor himself.”

Since Thor wasn’t there to creatively cuss, Sam did the honors, muttering a few comments that I doubted her grandparents would approve of.

“Those are just expressions,” I added hastily. “In no way was my friend giving you permission to do...any of those rude and colorful things. Will you barter with us for the h—for the weapon you spoke of?”

“Of course!” Gjalp grinned. “In fact, I’d like to wrap up these negotiations quickly since my sister and I have an appointment—”

“With hot frost giant twins,” Griep said.

“—so we’ll make you a fair deal,” Gjalp continued. “We’ll give you Thor’s weapon for that lovely talking sword. And we’ll release the swan—I’m pretty sure Dad will be okay with that—as long as you give yourselves in exchange. You won’t get a better deal than that.”

“That’s hardly a deal,” Sam growled.

“Then you can refuse,” Griep said, “and leave in peace. It’s all the same to us.”

Jack thrummed indignantly, his runes glowing. “Magnus, you’d never give me up, right? We’re friends! You’re not like your dad, gonna toss me aside as soon as you see something you like better?”

I thought about Loki’s suggestion that I give the sword to my Uncle Randolph. At the time, I’d actually been tempted. Now, the idea seemed impossible—and only partly because the giantesses wanted to put us in a cage and have us for dinner. Jack had saved our lives at least twice now. I liked him, even if he did occasionally call me *señor*.

An alternative came to me. A bad idea, yes, but better than the giants’ offer.

“Jack,” I said, “hypothetically speaking, if I told these giantesses how we killed their sister, would that break the rules of guest etiquette?”

“What?” Gjalp cried.

Jack’s runes glowed a more cheerful shade of red. “No etiquette problem there, my friend, because that happened before we were guests here.”

“Okay.” I smiled at the giantesses. “We killed your sister—big ugly lady, trying to block the river and drown Thor? Yeah. She’s dead now.”

“LIES!” Gjalp shot to her feet. “Puny humans! You could not possibly have killed our sister!”

“Actually, my sword flew up her nose and scrambled her brains.”

Griep howled in outrage. “I should have crushed you like bugs! Curse my lack of a stool and strategically placed ceiling spikes!”

I’ll admit, having two giantesses tower over me bellowing death threats was a wee bit unnerving.

But Sam kept her cool.

She pointed her ax accusingly at Griep. “So, you *were* trying to kill us just now!”

“Of course, you dolt!”

“Which violates the rules of hosts.”

“Who cares?” Griep cried.

“Magnus’s sword does,” Sam said. “Jack, did you hear that?”

“I sure did. I’d like to point out, though, that the effort required to kill these two giantesses might be too much—”

“Do it!” I hurled the sword.

Jack spiraled upward, straight into Griep's right nostril and out her left. The giantess collapsed, shaking the room at 6.8 on the Richter scale.

Gjalp stifled a scream. She covered her nose and mouth and stumbled around as Jack tried in vain to stab his way through her fingers.

"Oh, this one is getting smart!" Jack yelled. "A little help over here?"

"Magnus!" Sam pushed the giantess's steak knife to the edge of the table until the blade extended like a diving board.

I got what she wanted me to do. It was stupid crazy, but I didn't give myself time to reflect. I ran full tilt at the knife and jumped toward the end of the blade.

Sam yelled, "Wait!"

By then I was already in midair. I landed on the knife, which catapulted upward as I dropped. The plan worked, sort of. I landed on the empty seat of the chair, which was not far enough down to kill me, but was enough to break my leg. Hooray! The pain drove a hot nail up the base of my spine.

Gjalp got it worse. The spinning steak knife hit her in the chest. It didn't impale her. It didn't even go through her dress, but the poke was enough to make her yell. She lowered her hands, grabbing instinctively for her chest, which allowed Jack full access to her nose.

A second later, Gjalp was lying dead on the floor next to her sister.

"Magnus!" Sam lowered herself off the table and dropped next to me on the chair. "You fool! I wanted you to help me throw a saltshaker on the blade! I didn't expect you to jump on it yourself!"

"You're welcome." I grimaced. "Also, ow."

"Is it broken?"

"Yeah. Don't worry, I'm a fast healer. Give me an hour—"

"I don't think we have—" Sam started to say.

From the next room, a deep voice boomed, "Girls, I'm home!"



## I'm Carried into Battle by the First Dwarven Airborne Division

THERE'S NEVER A GREAT TIME for Daddy Giant to come home.

But when you're sitting in his dining room with your leg broken, the corpses of two of his daughters sprawled nearby...that's an *especially* bad time. Sam and I stared at each other as the giant's footsteps echoed louder and louder in the next chamber.

Sam's expression said: *I got nothing.*

I, also, had nothing.

Which is exactly the sort of moment when you might welcome a dwarf, an elf, and a swan parachuting onto your chair. Blitzen and Hearth were lashed side-by-side in the harness, with Gunilla the waterfowl cradled in Hearthstone's arms. Blitzen pulled the steering toggles and executed a perfect landing. Behind him pooled the parachute—a swath of turquoise silk that exactly matched Blitz's suit. That was the only fact about his entrance that did *not* surprise me.

“How?” I asked.

Blitzen scoffed. “Why do you look so amazed? You distracted those giantesses long enough. I’d be a poor dwarf indeed if I couldn’t rig a grappling hook, shoot a line from the window to the birdcage, shimmy across, free the swan, and use my emergency parachute to get down here.”

Sam pinched her nose. “You’ve had an emergency parachute this entire time?”

“Don’t be silly,” Blitzen said. “Dwarves always carry emergency parachutes. Don’t you?”

“We’ll talk about this later,” I said. “Right now—”

“Girls?” called the giant from the next room. His speech sounded a little slurred. “Wh-where are you?”

I snapped my fingers. “Come on, guys, options. Sam, can you and Gunilla camouflage us?”

“My hijab can only cover two people,” Sam said. “And Gunilla...the fact that she’s still a swan might indicate she’s too weak to change back to normal.”

The swan honked.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Sam said. “It could be a few hours.”

“Which we don’t have.” I looked at Hearth. “Runestones?”

*No strength*, he signed, though he hardly needed to tell me that. He was upright and conscious but still looked like he’d been run over by an eight-legged horse.

“Jack!” I called to the sword. “Where is Jack?”

From the table above us, the sword yelled, “Dude, what? I’m washing off in this goblet. Give a guy some privacy, huh?”

“Magnus,” Sam said, “you can’t ask him to kill three giants in a row. That much effort really *will* kill you.”

In the next room, the footsteps got louder. The giant sounded like he was stumbling. “Gjalp? Griep? I swear—*HIC!*—if you’re texting those frost giant boys again, I will wring your necks!”

“The floor,” I decided. “Get me to the floor!”

Blitzen scooped me up, which almost made me black out from pain. He yelled, “Hang on!” and leaped from the chair, somehow managing to paraglide me down safely. By the time I regained my senses, Sam, Hearth, and his new pet swan were standing next to us, apparently having used the chair leg as a fire pole.

I shivered with nausea. My face was slick with sweat, and my broken leg felt like one enormous open blister, but we had no time for minor concerns like my unbearable pain. Across the threshold of the dining room door, the shadows of the giant’s feet got closer and darker, though they did seem to be weaving back and forth.

“Blitzen, carry me under that door!” I said. “We have to intercept Geirrod.”

“Excuse me?” asked the dwarf.

“You’re strong! You’re already holding me. Hurry!”

Grumbling, he jogged toward the door, every bounce sending a stab of pain into the base of my skull. The parachute slithered behind us. Sam and Hearth followed, the swan honking unhappily in Hearthstone’s arms.

The doorknob started to turn. We ducked under the sill and charged out the other side, right between the giant’s feet.

I yelled, “HI, HOW YA DOING!”

Geirrod stumbled back. I guess he hadn’t been expecting to see a paratrooper dwarf carrying a human, followed by another human and an elf holding a swan.

I wasn’t prepared for what I saw either.

For one thing, the room we entered was about half the size of the one we’d just left. By most standards, the hall would’ve been considered grand. The black marble floor gleamed. Rows of stone columns were interspersed with iron braziers filled with burning coals like dozens of barbecue grills. But the ceilings were only about twenty-five feet tall. Even the door we’d come through was smaller on this side, though that made no sense.

Squeezing back under the sill would be impossible. In fact, I didn’t see how Gjalp or Griep could have fit through the doorway, unless they changed size as they moved from room to room.

Maybe that’s what they did. Giants were shape-shifters. Magic and illusion were second nature to them. If I spent much more time here, I’d have to bring a large supply of motion sickness medicine and some 3-D glasses.

In front of us, Geirrod was still staggering around, sloshing mead from his drinking horn.

“Whoeryou?” he slurred.

“Guests!” I called. “We have claimed guest rights!”

I doubted those applied anymore, since we’d killed our hosts, but since my etiquette-minded sword was still in the next room, washing the nostril goo off his blade, nobody challenged me.

Geirrod frowned. He looked like he’d just come from a wild party at the Jotunheim Marquee, which was weird, since the day was young. Giants apparently partied 24/7.

He wore a rumpled mauve jacket, an untucked black dress shirt, striped slacks, and dress shoes that many patent leather animals had died to create. His dark hair was greased back but springing up in unruly cowlicks. His face had a three-day stubble. He reeked of fermented honey. The overall impression was less “fashionable nightclub dude” and more “well-dressed wino.”

The weirdest thing about him was his size. I’m not going to say he was short. Twenty feet tall is still good if you’re looking for somebody to play point in the NBA or change those hard-to-reach lightbulbs. But the guy was minuscule compared to his daughters, who were, of course, now dead.

Geirrod belched. Judging from his expression, he was making a mighty effort to form rational thoughts. “If you’re guests...why have you got my swan? And where are my daughters?”

Sam forced a laugh. “Oh, those crazy girls? We were bartering with them for your swan.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Right now they’re on the floor in the other room. They don’t look so good.” I mimed drinking from a bottle, which probably confused Hearthstone, as it looked like the sign for *I love you*.

Geirrod seemed to get my meaning. His shoulders relaxed, as if the idea of his daughters passing out drunk on the floor was nothing to be concerned about.

“Well, then,” he said, “as long as they weren’t—*HIC!*—entertaining those frost giant boys again.”

“Nope, just us,” I assured him.

Blitzen grunted as he shifted me in his arms. “Heavy.”

Hearthstone, trying to keep up with the conversation, signed *I love you* at the giant.

“Oh, Great Geirrod!” Sam said. “We actually came here to bargain for Thor’s weapon. Your daughters told us you have it.”

Geirrod glanced to his right. Against the far wall, almost hidden behind a column, was a human-sized iron door.

“And the weapon is behind that door,” I guessed.

Geirrod’s eyes widened. “What sorcery is this? How did you know that?”

“We want to barter for the weapon,” I repeated.

In Hearthstone’s arms, Gunilla honked irritably.

“And also for the freedom of this swan,” Sam added.

“Ha!” Geirrod sloshed more mead from his drinking horn. “I don’t—*HIC!*—need anything you could offer. But perhaps you could—*BELCH*—earn the weapon and the golden goose.”

“The swan,” I corrected.

“Whatever,” said the giant.

Blitzen whimpered, “Heavy. Very heavy.”

The pain in my leg made it hard to think. Every time Blitzen moved I wanted to scream, but I tried to keep a clear head.

“What did you have in mind?” I asked the giant.

“Entertain me! Join me in a game!”

“Like...Words with Friends?”

“What? No! Like catch!” He gestured disdainfully toward the dining room. “I have only daughters. They never want to play catch with me. I like playing catch! Play catch with me.”

I glanced at Sam. “I think he wants to play catch.”

“Bad idea,” she murmured.

“Survive ten minutes!” Geirrod said. “That’s all I ask! Then I’ll be—*HIC!*—happy.”

“Survive?” I asked. “A game of catch?”

“Good, so you agree!” He stumbled to the nearest brazier and scooped up a red-hot coal the size of an easy chair. “Go long!”



## Never Ask a Dwarf to “Go Long”

“RUN!” I TOLD BLITZEN. “Run, run, run!”

Blitzen, who was still trailing the parachute, only managed a dazed stumble. “Heavy, very heavy,” he wheezed again.

We made it about twenty feet before Geirrod yelled, “CATCH!”

The four of us ducked behind the nearest column as a coal cannonball slammed against it, burning a hole straight through the stone and spraying ash and sparks over our heads. The column groaned. Cracks spread all the way up to the ceiling.

“Run more!” Sam yelped.

We shambled across the hall as Geirrod scooped coals and threw them with appalling accuracy. If he hadn’t been drunk, we would’ve been in serious trouble.

The next salvo set Blitzen’s parachute on fire. Sam was able to cut it off with her ax, but we lost valuable time. Another chunk of flaming apocalypse blasted a crater in the floor next to us, singeing Gunilla’s wings and Hearthstone’s scarf. Sparks flew into Blitzen’s eyes.

“I’m blind!” he yelped.

“I’ll direct you!” I shouted. “Left! Left! Your other left!”

Meanwhile, across the hall, Geirrod was having a grand old time singing in Jotunese, staggering from brazier to brazier, occasionally dousing

himself in mead. “Come on now, little guests! This is not how you play. You’re supposed to catch the coals and throw them back!”

I looked around desperately for exits. There was one other door, on the wall directly across from the dining room, but it was too small to crawl under and too big to force open, not to mention barred with a tree-trunk beam across iron brackets.

For the first time since becoming an einherji, I was annoyed that my super-quick healing wasn’t super quick enough. If we were going to die, I at least wanted to be standing on my own two feet.

I glanced at the ceiling. Above the last column Geirrod had hit, cracks spread across the roof. The column bowed, ready to snap. I remembered the first time my mom had made me set up our camping tent by myself. The poles had been a nightmare. Getting them to hold the roof required just the right balance of tension. But making them collapse...that was easy.

“I’ve got an idea,” I said. “Blitzen, you’re going to have to carry me a while longer, unless Sam—”

“Um, no,” said Sam.

“I’m fine,” Blitzen whimpered. “I’m just great. I can almost see again.”

“Okay, everybody,” I said. “We’re going to run toward the giant.”

I didn’t need sign language to read Hearth’s expression: *Are you crazy?* The swan gave me the same look.

“Just follow my lead,” I said. “It’ll be fun.”

“Please,” Sam begged, “don’t let those words be carved on my tombstone.”

I yelled at the giant, “Hey, Geirrod, you throw like a Folkvanger person!”

“What? BAH!” Geirrod turned to scoop up another coal.

“Straight at him,” I told my friends. “Go!”

As the giant prepared to throw, I told Blitzen, “Right, go right!”

We all ducked behind the nearest pillar. Geirrod’s coal bored straight through it, spewing cinders and sending more cracks up the ceiling.

“Now left,” I told my friends. “Toward him and up another row.”

“What are you—” Sam’s eyes widened with understanding. “Oh, gods, you really *are* crazy.”

“Got a better idea?”

“Sadly, no.”

We ran across Geirrod’s line of sight.

“Your daughters aren’t drunk!” I shouted. “They’re dead!”

“WHAT? NO!”

Another coal cannonball hurtled toward us, hitting the nearest column with such force, it collapsed into a pile of colossal stone Lifesavers.

The ceiling groaned. The cracks spread. We ran into the central aisle and I yelled, “MISSED AGAIN!”

Geirrod howled in fury. He tossed aside his drinking horn so he could scoop coals with both hands. Fortunately for us, his anger and his double-handed throwing made his aim terrible. We jogged around him, weaving from column to column as he splattered coal everywhere, tipping over braziers, breaking pillars.

I insulted Geirrod’s suit, his haircut, his patent leather shoes. Finally the giant tossed an entire brazier at us, taking out the last support pillar on his side of the room.

“Retreat!” I told Blitzen. “Go! NOW!”

Poor Blitzen huffed and wheezed. We ran for the far wall as Geirrod shouted, “Cowards! I will kill you!”

He easily could have run after us and caught us, but the giant’s drunken mind was still thinking in terms of projectile weapons. He searched around him for more coals as the ceiling above him crumbled.

Too late, he realized what was happening. He looked up and screamed as half the room collapsed on top of him, burying Geirrod under a thousand tons of rock.

The next thing I knew, I was on the floor in a whiteout of dust and debris, trying my best to cough up my lungs.

Slowly the air cleared. A few feet away, Sam sat cross-legged, also hacking and gasping, looking like she’d been rolled in flour.

“Blitzen?” I called. “Hearth?”

I was so worried about them I forgot about my broken leg. I tried to stand and was surprised to find that I could. The leg still throbbed with agony, but it held my weight.

Blitzen came stumbling out of a dust cloud. “Present.” he squeaked. His suit was ruined. His hair and beard had gone prematurely gray with plaster.

I tackled him in a hug. “You,” I said, “are the strongest, most amazing dwarf ever.”

“Okay, kid, okay.” He patted my arm. “Where’s Hearthstone? Hearth!”

In moments like that, we forgot that yelling Hearthstone's name wasn't really helpful.

"Here he is," Sam called, brushing some rubble off the fallen elf. "I think he's okay."

"Thank Odin!" Blitz started forward but almost fell.

"Whoa, there." I propped him against one of the remaining columns. "Just rest for a sec. I'll be right back."

I jogged over to Sam and helped her extract Hearthstone from the wreckage.

His hair was smoldering, but otherwise he looked all right. We pulled him to his feet. Immediately he started scolding me in sign language: *Stupid? Trying to kill us?*

It took me a second to realize he wasn't holding the swan.

"Wait," I said. "Where's Gunilla?"

Behind me, Blitzen yelped. I turned and discovered a hostage situation in progress.

"I'm right here," Gunilla snarled. She was back in human form, standing behind Blitzen, the point of her blazing spear pressed to his throat. "And the four of you are coming back to Valhalla as my prisoners."



## Sam Hits the EJECT Button

GUNILLA JABBED HER spear tip against Blitz's jugular.

"No closer," she warned. "Rogues and liars, all of you. You've endangered Midgard and Asgard, roused the giants, caused chaos across the realms—"

"We also rescued you from a birdcage," I added.

"After luring me here in the first place!"

"Nobody lured you," I said. "Nobody asked you to hunt us."

"Gunilla." Samirah placed her ax on the floor. "Let the dwarf go, please."

"Urgh," Blitzen agreed.

The Valkyrie captain glanced at Hearthstone. "You, elf—don't even *think* about it. Put that bag of runestones on the floor or I will burn you to ashes."

I hadn't realized Hearthstone was about to make a move. He complied with Gunilla's order, though his eyes blazed. He looked like he wanted to do something much worse to Gunilla than put her in a magic hamster wheel.

Sam raised her palms. "We're not going to fight you. Please, release the dwarf. We all know what a Valkyrie spear can do."

I didn't, actually, but I tried to look as meek and harmless as possible. As exhausted as I felt, it wasn't hard.

Gunilla eyed me. "Where is your sword, Magnus?"

I gestured to the ruined end of the hall. "Last I checked, he was taking a bath in a goblet."

Gunilla considered that. It was the sort of statement that only made sense in the loony world of the Vikings. "Very well." She shoved Blitzen toward me.

She swept her spear forward, keeping us all within striking distance. The weapon's light was so intense I felt like it was baking my skin.

"We will return to Asgard as soon as my full strength returns," said Gunilla. "In the meantime, explain why you were asking the giants about Thor's weapon."

"Oh..." I remembered Thor being pretty specific about not telling anyone of his missing hammer. "Well—"

"A trick," Sam interrupted. "To confuse the giants."

Gunilla narrowed her eyes. "A dangerous trick. If the giants believed Thor had lost his hammer...the consequences would be unthinkable."

"Speaking of unthinkable," I said, "Surt is going to release Fenris Wolf tomorrow night."

"Tonight," Sam corrected.

My stomach dropped. "Isn't it Tuesday? Freya said the full moon was Wednesday—"

"Which technically starts at sundown on Tuesday," Sam said. "The full moon rises tonight."

"Well that's just wonderful," I said. "Why didn't you say so?"

"I thought you understood."

"Silence, both of you!" Gunilla ordered. "Magnus Chase, you've fallen for the lies of this daughter of Loki."

"You mean the full moon isn't tonight?"

"No, it's tonight. I meant—" Gunilla scowled. "Stop confusing me!"

Blitzen whimpered as she throttled him with her light spear. Hearthstone edged next to me, his fists clenched.

I raised my hands. "Gunilla, all I'm saying is, if you don't let us go so we can stop Surt—"

"I warned you," Gunilla said. "Listening to Samirah will only hasten Ragnarok. Feel fortunate *I* found you rather than the other Valkyries who

are hunting you, or your former einherjar hallmates. They are anxious to prove their loyalty to Valhalla by killing you. I, at least, will make sure you get a proper trial before the thanes cast your soul into Ginnungagap!"

Samirah and I exchanged glances. We didn't have time to be captured and sent back to Asgard. I definitely didn't have time to get my soul cast into a place I couldn't even pronounce.

Hearthstone saved us. His face became transfixed with horror. He pointed behind Gunilla as if Geirrod was rising from the rubble. It was the oldest trick in the Nine Worlds, and it worked.

Gunilla glanced behind her. Sam lunged with blinding speed. Instead of trying to tackle the Valkyrie captain, she simply touched the golden bracer on Gunilla's arm.

The air hummed as if someone had turned on an industrial vacuum cleaner.

Gunilla shrieked. She stared at Sam in dismay. "What have you—"

The Valkyrie imploded. She collapsed into a pinpoint of light and was gone.

"Sam?" I couldn't believe what had happened. "You—you killed her?"

"Of course not!" Sam swatted my arm. (Thankfully, I did not implode.) "I just recalled her to Valhalla."

"The armband?" asked Blitzen.

Sam smiled modestly. "I didn't know if it would work. I guess my fingerprints haven't been de-registered from the Valkyrie database yet."

Hearthstone rolled his hand. *Explain.*

"Valkyrie armbands have an emergency evacuation feature," Sam said. "If a Valkyrie is wounded in battle and needs immediate attention, another Valkyrie can send her back to the Halls of Healing simply by touching her armband. She'll be instantly extracted, but it's powerful magic. One use and the armband melts."

I blinked. "So Gunilla got yanked to Valhalla."

"Yep. But I haven't bought us much time. She'll be back as soon as she gathers her strength. I imagine she'll bring reinforcements, too."

"Thor's hammer," I said. "The storage room."

We ran for the small iron door. I'd like to say I had carefully planned the ceiling's collapse to make sure the door didn't get buried in wreckage. In truth, I just got lucky.

Sam's ax cut through the lock in one swipe. Hearthstone yanked open the door. Inside was a closet, empty except for an iron pole the size of a broom handle leaning against the corner.

"Well," I said. "That's kind of anticlimactic."

Blitzen studied the iron pole. "I dunno, kid. See this rune-work? It isn't Mjolnir, but this staff was forged with powerful magic."

Sam's face fell. "Oh...Thor's weapon. Just not the *right* weapon."

"Mmm." Blitzen nodded sagely.

"Mmm," I agreed. "Would one of you tell me what you're talking about?"

"Kid, this is Thor's backup weapon," Blitz explained. "The staff was a gift from a friend of his—the giantess Grid."

"Three questions," I said. "First: Thor has a giantess friend?"

"Yes," Blitz said. "Not all giants are bad."

"Second: Do all giantess names begin with G?"

"No."

"Last question: Thor is a martial artist? Does he have, like, backup nunchuks, too?"

"Hey, kid, don't dis the staff. It may not be dwarven work like the hammer, but giant-forged iron is still powerful stuff. I hope we're able to pick it up and carry it back to Thor. I'm sure it's heavy and protected by enchantments."

"You needn't worry about that!" bellowed a voice above.

From one of the high windows, the god of thunder soared into the room on a chariot pulled by Otis and Marvin. My sword Jack floated along next to them.

Thor landed in front of us in all his grungy glory. "Good work, mortals!" He grinned. "You found the staff. That's better than nothing!"

"And, dude," said Jack, "I take one quick bath. I turn around and not only have you left the room, but you've collapsed the exit. What's a sword supposed to think?"

I bit back a comment. "Yeah. Sorry, Jack."

Thor reached out toward the supply closet. The iron rod flew into his hand. Thor executed a few thrusts, swipes, and baton twirls. "Yes, this will do nicely until I find that—ah, *other* weapon which is not officially missing. Thanks!"

I tried to resist the urge to smack him. "You have a flying chariot?"

“Of course!” He laughed. “Thor without his flying chariot would be like a dwarf without an emergency parachute!”

“Thank you,” Blitz said.

“You could have flown us straight here,” I noted. “You could have saved us a day and a half and several close calls with death. But you let us climb that cliff, navigate a chasm—”

“I would never deprive you of the chance to prove your heroism!” the thunder god said.

Blitzen whimpered.

Hearthstone signed, *I hate this god.*

“Exactly, Mr. Elf!” Thor said. “I gave you the opportunity to prove your mettle. You’re quite welcome!”

Otis bleated and clopped his hooves. “Besides, the boss couldn’t show up here without his hammer, especially since his daughter was stuck in that birdcage.”

Sam flinched. “You *knew* about that?”

Thor scowled at his goat. “Otis, we need to have another talk about you keeping your snout shut.”

“Sorry.” Otis hung his horns. “Go ahead and kill me. It’s fine.”

Marvin nipped him. “Will you shut up? Every time you get killed, I get killed!”

Thor rolled his eyes at the ceiling. “‘What kind of animals would you like pulling your chariot, Thor?’ my dad asked me. ‘Goats,’ I said. ‘Flying re-consumable goats would be great.’ I could’ve chosen dragons or lions, but nooooo.” He faced Sam. “To answer your question, yes, I sensed Gunilla was here. I can usually tell when one of my children is nearby. I figured, if you could save her, that would be a nice bonus. But I also didn’t want her learning about my missing hammer. That information is a bit sensitive. You should feel honored I told *you* about it, daughter of Loki.”

Sam inched away. “You know about that? Listen, Lord Thor—”

“Girl, stop calling me *lord*. I’m a god of the common people, not a lord! And don’t worry, I won’t kill you. Not all of Loki’s brood is evil. Even Loki himself...” He heaved a sigh. “I kind of miss the guy.”

Sam looked at him sideways. “You do?”

“Oh, sure.” Thor scratched his red beard. “Most of the time I wanted to kill him, like when he cut off all my wife’s hair, or convinced me to wear a bridal gown.”

“Do what now?” I asked.

“But Loki made life interesting,” Thor continued. “People got the idea we were brothers, which isn’t true. He was *Odin’s* blood brother. Still, I understand how the rumor got started. I hate to admit it, but Loki and I made a good team.”

“Like Marvin and me,” Otis suggested. “My therapist says—”

“Shut up, you dolt!” said Marvin.

Thor twirled his iron staff. “At any rate, thanks for this. It will help until I can find that *other* item. And please, *DO NOT* mention my loss to anyone. Not even my children. *Especially* not them. Otherwise I’d have to kill you, and I might even feel bad about that.”

“But what will you do without Mjolnir?” Sam asked. “How will you—”

“Watch television?” Thor shrugged. “I know...the screen size and resolution on the end of this staff are pitiful, but I will have to make do. As for you, the island of Lyngvi rises from the waves tonight. You must hurry! Good-bye, mortals, and—”

“Hold up,” I said. “We need the location of the island.”

Thor frowned. “Oh, right. I was supposed to give that to you. Well, all you have to do is seek out the dwarf brothers at the Long Wharf in Boston. They will take you to the island. Their boat usually leaves at sunset.”

“Ah, dwarves.” Blitz nodded approvingly. “We can trust them, then?”

“Oh, no,” Thor said. “They’ll try to kill you at the first opportunity, but they *do* know the way to the island.”

“Lord Th—I mean, Thor,” said Sam, “Won’t you come with us? This is an important battle—the fire lord Surt, Fenris Wolf. Surely that’s worthy of your attention.”

Thor’s right eye twitched. “That’s a fine offer. Really. I’d love to, but I have another pressing appointment—”

“*Game of Thrones*,” Marvin explained.

“Shut up!” Thor raised his staff over our heads. “Use your time well, heroes. Prepare for battle, and be at the Long Wharf by sundown!”

The room started to spin. Jack the sword flew into my hand, flooding me with exhaustion.

I braced myself against the nearest column. “Thor, where are you sending us?”

The thunder god chuckled. “Wherever you each need to go.”

Jotunheim collapsed around me like a tent falling on my head.



## What the Hel?

I STOOD ALONE in a snowstorm on Bunker Hill.

My exhaustion was gone. Jack had returned to pendant form around my neck. None of that made sense, but I didn't seem to be dreaming.

I felt like I was really in Charlestown, just across the river from Boston, standing right where my fourth grade school bus had dropped us off for a class trip. Gauzy curtains of snow swept across the brownstones. The park itself wasn't much more than a white field dotted with bare trees. In the center, a gray obelisk rose into the winter sky. After my time in Geirrod's fortress, the monument looked small and sad.

Thor had said I'd be sent where I needed to go. Why did I need to be here, and where were my friends?

A voice at my shoulder said, "Tragic, isn't it?"

I hardly flinched. I supposed I was getting used to strange Norse entities popping up in my personal space.

Standing next to me, gazing at the monument, was a woman with eleven-pale skin and long dark hair. In profile, she looked heart-achingly beautiful, about twenty-five years old. Her ermine cloak shimmered like a snowdrift rippling in the wind.

Then she turned toward me, and my lungs flattened against the back of my rib cage.

The right side of the woman's face was a nightmare—withered skin, patches of blue ice covering decayed flesh, membrane-thin lips over rotten teeth, a milky white eye, and tufts of desiccated hair like black spiderwebs.

I tried to tell myself, *Okay, this isn't so bad. She's just like that guy Two-Face from Batman.* But Two-Face had always struck me as kind of comical, like, come on, nobody with that much facial damage could be alive.

The woman in front of me was *very* real. She looked like someone who'd been stuck halfway through a door when a devastating blizzard struck. Or worse...some hideous ghoul who'd tried to transform into a human, only to get interrupted in the middle of the process.

"You're Hel." My voice sounded like I was five years old again.

She lifted her skeletal right hand, brushing a tuft of hair behind her ear...or the stub of frostbitten flesh that might once have been an ear.

"I am Hel," she agreed. "Sometimes called Hela, though most mortals dare not speak my name at all. No jokes, Magnus Chase? *Who the Hel are you? What the Hel do you want? You look Hela bad.* I was expecting more bravado."

I was fresh out of bravado. The best I could manage was not running away shrieking. Wind gusted around Hel, lifting a few flakes of blackened skin from her zombie forearm and swirling them into the snow.

"Wh-what do you want?" I asked. "I'm already dead. I'm an einherji."

"I know that, young hero. I don't want your soul. I have plenty of those already. I called you here to talk."

"You brought me? I thought Thor—"

"Thor." The goddess scoffed. "If you want someone who can navigate one hundred and seventy channels of HD content, go to Thor. If you want someone who can accurately send people through the Nine Worlds, he's not your guy."

"So—"

"So I thought it was high time we talked. My father did mention I'd be seeking you out, yes? He gave you an exit strategy, Magnus: Surrender the sword to your uncle. Remove it from play. This is your last opportunity. Perhaps you can take a lesson from this place."

"Bunker Hill?"

She turned toward the monument so only her mortal side was visible. "Sad and meaningless. Another hopeless battle, like the one you're about to engage in...."

Granted, my American history was a little rusty, but I was pretty sure they didn't build monuments at the site of sad and meaningless events.

"Wasn't Bunker Hill a victory? Americans holding off the British at the top of the hill? Don't fire until you see..."

She fixed me with her milky zombie gaze, and I couldn't make myself say *the whites of their eyes*.

"For every hero, a thousand cowards," said Hel. "For every brave death, a thousand senseless ones. For every einherji...a thousand souls who enter my realm."

She pointed with her withered hand. "Right over there, a British boy of your age died behind a hay bale, crying for his mother. He was the youngest of his regiment. His own commander shot him for cowardice. Do you think he appreciates this lovely monument? And there, at the top of the hill, after their ammunition ran out, your ancestors threw rocks at the British, fighting like cavemen. Some fled. Some stayed and were butchered with bayonets. Which were smarter?"

She smiled. I wasn't sure which side of her mouth was more ghastly—the living zombie, or the beautiful woman who was amused by massacres.

"No one ever said *the whites of their eyes*," she continued. "That's a myth, made up years later. This isn't even Bunker Hill. It's Breed's Hill. And though the battle was costly to the British, it was an American defeat, not a victory. Such is human memory...you forget the truth and believe what makes you feel better."

Snow melted against my neck, dampening my collar. "What's your point? I shouldn't fight? I should just let Surt free your brother the Big Bad Wolf?"

"I merely point out options," Hel said. "Did Bunker Hill really affect the outcome of your Revolution? If you face Surt tonight, will you delay Ragnarok or hasten it? Charging into battle is what the hero would do—the sort of person who ends up in Valhalla. But what of the millions of souls who lived more careful lives and died peacefully in their beds at an old age? They ended up in my realm. Were they not wiser? Do you really belong in Valhalla, Magnus?"

The words of the Norns seemed to spiral around me in the cold.  
*Wrongly chosen, wrongly slain; a hero Valhalla cannot contain.*

I thought about my hallmate T.J., still carrying his rifle and wearing his Civil War coat, charging up hills day after day in a series of endless battles,

waiting for his final death at Ragnarok. I thought about Halfborn Gunderson, trying to stay sane by earning PhDs in literature when he wasn't going berserk and smashing skulls. Did I belong with those guys?

"Take the sword to your uncle," Hel urged. "Let events unfold without you. This is the safer course. If you do so...my father Loki has asked me to reward you."

The skin on my face burned. I had an irrational fear that I might be decaying from frostbite, becoming like Hel. "Reward me?"

"Helheim is not such a terrible place," said the goddess. "My hall has many fine chambers for my favored guests. A reunion could be arranged."

"A reunion..." I could barely speak the words. "With my mother? You have her?"

The goddess seemed to consider the question, tilting her head from the living side to the dead. "I *could* have her. The status of her soul, of everything that she was, is still in flux."

"How...? I don't—"

"The prayers and wishes of the living often affect the dead, Magnus. Mortals have always known that." She bared her teeth—rotten on one side, pristine white on the other. "I cannot return Natalie Chase to life, but I can unite you both in Helheim if you wish it. I can bind your souls there so that you will never be separated. You could be a family again."

I tried to imagine that. My tongue froze in my mouth.

"You need not speak," Hel said. "Only give me an indication. Cry for your mother. Let your tears fall, and I will know you agree. But you must decide now. If you reject my offer, if you insist on fighting your own Bunker Hill tonight, I promise you will never see your mother again in this life or any other."

I thought about my mother skipping stones with me at Houghton's Pond, her green eyes sparkling with humor. She spread her arms in the sunlight, trying to explain what my father was like. *That's why I bring you here, Magnus. Can't you feel it? He's all around us.*

Then I imagined my mother in a cold dark palace, her soul bound for eternity. I remember my own corpse in the funeral home—an embalmed relic, dressed up for display. I thought about the faces of the drowned souls swirling in Ran's net.

"You are crying," Hel noted with satisfaction. "Then we have a deal?"

“You don’t understand.” I looked at the goddess. “I’m crying because I know what my mother would want. She’d want me to remember her as she was. That’s the only monument she needs. She wouldn’t want to be trapped, preserved, forced to live as a ghost in some cold storage underworld.”

Hel scowled, the right side of her face wrinkling and crackling. “You dare?”

“You want bravado?” I pulled my pendant from its chain. Jack the sword stretched to full length, his blade steaming in the cold. “Leave me alone. Tell Loki we have no deal. If I see you again, I’ll cut you right down the dotted line.”

I raised my blade.

The goddess dissolved into snow. My surroundings faded. Suddenly I found myself balanced at the edge of a rooftop, five stories above a stretch of asphalt.



## The Terror That Is Middle School

BEFORE I COULD plummet to my death, someone grabbed me and pulled me back.

“Whoa, there, cowboy,” Sam said.

She was dressed in a new peacoat—navy blue this time, with dark jeans and boots. Blue wasn’t my favorite color, but it made her look dignified and serious, like an air force officer. Her headscarf was freckled with snow. Her ax wasn’t at her side; I guessed it was tucked in the backpack over her shoulder.

She didn’t look surprised to see me. Then again, her expression was preoccupied, her gaze stuck somewhere in the distance.

My senses started to adjust. Jack was still in my hand. For some reason, I didn’t feel any exhaustion from his recent slaying of the giant sisters.

Below us, the patch of asphalt was not exactly a playground—more like a holding area between school buildings. Inside the chain-link fence, a few dozen students huddled in cliques, chatting in doorways or pushing each other around the icy pavement. They looked like seventh graders, though it was hard to be sure with everybody in their dark winter coats.

I willed my sword back into pendant form and returned it to its chain. I figured I shouldn’t be walking on the roof of a school with a broadsword.

“Where are we?” I asked Sam.

“My old stomping ground.” Her voice had a bitter edge. “Malcolm X Middle School.”

I tried to imagine Sam down in that courtyard, mingling with those cliques of girls, her headscarf the only splash of color in the crowd.

“Why did Thor send you back to middle school?” I asked. “That seems especially cruel.”

She smirked. “He actually transported me home. I appeared in my bedroom, just in time for Jid and Bibi to barge in and demand to know where I’d been. That conversation was worse than middle school.”

My heart sank. I’d been so focused on my own problems I’d forgotten that Sam was trying to balance a normal life on top of everything else. “What did you tell them?”

“That I’d been staying with friends. They’ll assume I meant Marianne Shaw.”

“Rather than three strange guys.”

She hugged her arms. “I told Bibi I tried to text her, which is true. She’ll assume it was her fault. Bibi is hopeless with phones. Actually, Jotunheim just has no reception. I—I try not to actually *lie*, but I hate misleading them. After everything they’ve done for me, they worry I’m going to get in trouble, turn out like my mom.”

“You mean a successful doctor who liked to help people? Gee, that would be terrible.”

She gave me an eye roll. “You know what I mean—a rebel, an embarrassment. They locked me in my room, told me I was grounded until Doomsday. I didn’t have the heart to tell them that might be tonight.”

The wind picked up, spinning the old metal roof fans like pinwheels.

“How did you sneak out?” I asked.

“I didn’t. I just appeared here.” She gazed down into the courtyard. “Maybe I needed a reminder of how it all started.”

My brain felt as rusty as the roof fans, but one thought gained traction and started to spin. “This is where you became a Valkyrie.”

Sam nodded. “A frost giant...he’d gotten into the school somehow. Maybe looking for me, maybe hunting some other demigod. He wrecked a few classrooms, caused a panic. He didn’t seem to care if there were mortal casualties. The school went on lockdown. They didn’t know what they were dealing with. They thought some crazy human was making a scene. They called the police, but there was no time....”

She slipped her hands into her coat pockets. “I taunted the giant—insulted his mom, that kind of thing. I lured him up here to the roof and...” She looked below us. “The giant couldn’t fly. He landed right there on the asphalt and shattered into a million shards of ice.”

She sounded strangely embarrassed.

“You took on a giant single-handedly,” I said. “You saved your school.”

“I suppose,” she said. “The staff, the police...they never figured out what happened. They thought the guy must’ve fled the scene. In the confusion, nobody noticed what I’d done...except Odin. After the giant died, the All-Father appeared in front of me, right where you’re standing. He offered me a job as a Valkyrie. I accepted.”

After my conversation with Hel, I didn’t think it was possible for me to feel worse. The loss of my mother still stung as painfully as the night she’d died. But Sam’s story made me feel bad in a different way. Sam had brought me to Valhalla. She’d lost her place among the Valkyries because she believed I was a hero—a hero like *her*. And despite all that had happened since, she didn’t seem to blame me.

“Do you regret it?” I asked. “Taking my soul when I fell?”

She laughed under her breath. “You don’t get it, Magnus. I was *told* to bring you to Valhalla. And not by Loki. By Odin himself.”

My pendant heated up against my collarbone. For an instant, I smelled warm roses and strawberries, as if I’d stepped through a pocket of summer.

“Odin,” I said. “I thought he was missing...hadn’t appeared since you became a Valkyrie.”

“He told me to say nothing.” Sam shivered. “I guess I failed in that, too. The night before your fight with Surt, Odin met me outside my grandparents’ house. He was disguised as a homeless guy—a ratty beard, an old blue coat, a broad-brimmed hat. But I knew who he was. The eye patch, the voice....He told me to watch for you, and if you fought well, to bring you to Valhalla.”

Down in the courtyard, a period bell rang. The students headed inside, jostling and laughing. For them, it was a normal school day—the kind of day I could hardly remember.

“I was *wrongly chosen*,” I said. “The Norns told me I wasn’t supposed to be in Valhalla.”

“Yet you were,” Sam said. “Odin foresaw it. I don’t know why the contradiction, but we have to finish this quest. We have to reach that island

tonight.”

I watched the snow erase footprints in the empty yard. Soon there’d be no more trace of the students than there was of the frost giant’s impact from two years ago.

I wasn’t sure what to think about Odin choosing me for Valhalla. I suppose I should’ve felt honored. The All-Father himself thought I was important. He had chosen me, no matter what the Norns said. But if that was true, why hadn’t Odin bothered to meet me in person? Loki was bound on a slab for eternity. *He’d* found a way to talk to me. Mimir was a severed head. He’d made the trip. But the All-Father, the great sorcerer who could supposedly bend reality just by speaking a rune—he couldn’t find the time for a quick check-in?

Hel’s voice echoed in my head: *Do you really belong in Valhalla, Magnus?*

“I just came from Bunker Hill,” I told Sam. “Hel offered me a reunion with my mother.”

I managed to tell her the story.

Samirah reached out as if to touch my arm, then apparently changed her mind. “I’m so sorry, Magnus. But Hel lies. You can’t trust her. She’s just like my father, only colder. You made the right choice.”

“Yeah...still. You ever do the right thing, and you *know* it’s the right thing, but it leaves you feeling horrible?”

“You’ve just described most days of my life.” Sam pulled up her hood. “When I became a Valkyrie...I’m still not sure why I fought that frost giant. The kids at Malcolm X were terrible to me. The usual garbage: they asked me if I was a terrorist. They yanked off my hijab. They slipped disgusting notes and pictures into my locker. When that giant attacked...I could’ve pretended to be just another mortal and gotten myself to safety. But I didn’t even think about running away. Why did I risk my life for those kids?”

I smiled.

“What?” she demanded.

“Somebody once told me that a hero’s bravery has to be unplanned—a genuine response to a crisis. It has to come from the heart, without any thought of reward.”

Sam huffed. “That somebody sounds pretty smug.”

“Maybe you didn’t need to come here,” I decided. “Maybe *I* did. To understand why we’re a good team.”

“Oh?” She arched an eyebrow. “Are we a good team now?”

“We’re about to find out.” I gazed north into the snowstorm.

Somewhere in that direction lay downtown Boston and Long Wharf. “Let’s find Blitzen and Hearthstone. We’ve got a fire giant to extinguish.”



## A Lovely Homicidal Sunset Cruise

BLITZ AND HEARTH were waiting for us outside the New England Aquarium.

Blitz had scored a new outfit, of course: olive-colored fatigues, a yellow ascot, and a matching yellow pith helmet with yellow sun-proof netting. “My wolf-hunting clothes!” he told us cheerfully.

He explained how Thor’s magic had transported him where he most needed to be: the best department store in Nidavellir. He’d used his Svartalf Express Card to charge a number of expeditionary supplies, including several spare outfits and a retractable bone steel harpoon.

“Not only that,” Blitz said, “but the contest scandal with Junior? It backfired on the old maggot! Word got around about how badly he failed. Nobody is blaming me anymore, or the horsefly, or anything! People started talking about my stylish armor designs, and now they’re clamoring for product. If I live through tonight, I might get to start my own clothing line after all!”

Sam and I both congratulated him, though living through the night did seem like a pretty big *if*. Nevertheless, Blitz was so happy, I didn’t want to bring him down. He started bouncing on his heels, singing “Sharp Dressed Dwarf” under his breath.

As for Hearth, he'd done a different kind of shopping. He was now carrying a polished staff of white oak. At the top, the staff split into a Y like a slingshot. I got the feeling—I don't know how—that a piece was missing between the two prongs.

With his staff in hand, Hearth looked like a proper sword-and-sorcery elf—except that he was still wearing black jeans, a leather jacket over a HOUSE OF BLUES T-shirt, and a candy-striped scarf.

Hearth rested the staff in the crook of his arm and explained in signs how he'd ended up at Mimir's Well. The Capo had pronounced him a full master of alf seidr, ready to use a sorcerer's staff.

"Isn't that awesome?" Blitzen clapped him on the back. "I knew he could do it!"

Hearthstone pursed his lips. *I don't feel like a master.*

"I've got something that might help." I reached in my pocket and pulled out the runestone perthro. "A couple of hours ago I had a conversation with Hel. She reminded me of everything I've lost."

I told them what the half-zombie goddess had offered me.

"Ah, kid..." Blitzen shook his head. "Here I've been going on about my new clothing line, and you had to deal with *that*."

"It's okay," I assured him. Strangely, it *did* feel okay. "The thing is, when I appeared on Bunker Hill, I'd just used my sword to kill two giantesses. I should've passed out or died from exhaustion. I didn't. I think I know why."

I turned the runestone between my fingers. "The longer I'm with you guys, the easier it gets to use my sword, or heal, or do anything, really. I'm no magic expert, but I think...somehow, we're sharing the cost."

I held out the rune for Hearthstone. "I know what it feels like to be an empty cup, to have everything taken away from you. But you're not alone. However much magic you need to use, it's okay. We've got you. We're your family."

Hearth's eyes rimmed with green water. He signed to us, and this time I think he actually meant *I love you* and not *the giantesses are drunk*.

He took the rune and set it between the prongs of his new staff. The stone snapped into place the same way my pendant did on its chain. The symbol perthro glowed with a gentle gold light.

*My sign*, he announced. *My family's sign.*

Blitzen sniffled. "I like that. A family of four empty cups!"

Sam wiped her eyes. “Suddenly I feel thirsty.”

“Al-Abbas,” I said, “I nominate you for the role of annoying sister.”

“Shut up, Magnus.” She straightened her coat, shouldered her backpack, and took a deep breath. “All right. If we’re done with the family bonding, I don’t suppose anyone knows where we can find two dwarves with a boat?”

“I do.” Blitzen fluffed his ascot. “Hearth and I scouted it out before you got here. Come on!”

He led the way down the pier. I think he just wanted us to appreciate how well he swaggered in his new yellow pith helmet.

At the end of Long Wharf, across from the closed-for-the-season kiosk for whale watching tours, another kiosk had been cobbled together from plywood scraps and cardboard appliance boxes. Above the service window, a sloppily finger-painted sign read: WOLF-WATCHING CRUISE. TONIGHT ONLY! ONE RED GOLD PER PERSON! CHILDREN UNDER FIVE FREE!

Sitting in the booth was a dwarf who was definitely less svartalf and more maggot. About two feet tall, he had so much facial hair it was impossible to tell if he had eyes or a mouth. He was dressed in a yellow rain slicker and a captain’s hat, which no doubt protected him from the dim daylight and also made him look like the mascot for a gnomish lobster restaurant franchise.

“Hello, there!” said the dwarf. “Fjalar, at your service. Care to take the cruise? Lovely wolf-spotting weather!”

“Fjalar?” Blitzen’s face sagged. “You wouldn’t happen to have a brother named Gjalar?”

“Right over there.”

I wasn’t sure how I’d missed it, but docked a few feet away was a Viking longship fitted with an outboard motor. At the stern, chewing on a piece of jerky, sat another dwarf who looked exactly like Fjalar except he wore grease-stained coveralls and a floppy-brimmed felt hat.

“I can see you’ve heard about our exceptional service,” Fjalar continued. “So can I put you down for four tickets? Once-a-year opportunity!”

“Excuse us a moment.” Blitzen steered us out of earshot. “Those are Fjalar and Gjalar,” he whispered. “They’re notorious.”

“Thor warned us,” Sam said. “We don’t have much choice.”

“I know, but”—Blitzen wrung his hands—“Fjalar and Gjalar? They’ve been robbing and murdering people for over a thousand years! They’ll try

to kill us if we give them any opportunity.”

“So basically,” I summed up, “they’re like pretty much everyone else we’ve met.”

“They’ll stab us in the back,” Blitz fretted, “or strand us on a desert island, or shove us overboard into the mouth of a shark.”

Hearth pointed to himself then tapped a finger to his palm. *I’m sold.*  
We marched back to the kiosk.

I smiled at the homicidal lobster mascot. “We’d love four tickets, please.”



## Heather Is My New Least Favorite Flower

I DIDN'T THINK anything could be worse than our fishing expedition with Harald. I was wrong.

As soon as we left the harbor, the sky darkened. The water turned as black as squid ink. Through the haze of snow, the shoreline of Boston morphed into something primeval—the way it might have looked when Skirnir's descendant first sailed his longship up the Charles.

Downtown was reduced to a few gray hills. The runways at Logan Airport turned to sheets of ice floating on open water. Islands sank and rose around us like a time-lapse video of the last two millennia.

It occurred to me that I might be looking at the future rather than the past—the way Boston would appear after Ragnarok. I decided to keep that thought to myself.

In the quiet of the bay, Gjalar's outboard motor made an obscene amount of noise—rattling, growling, and coughing smoke as our boat cut through the water. Any monsters within a five-mile radius would know where to find us.

At the prow, Fjalar kept watch, occasionally shouting warnings to his brother, “Rocks to port! Iceberg to starboard! Kraken at two o’clock!”

None of that helped calm my nerves. Surt had promised we would meet tonight. He planned on burning my friends and me alive, and destroying the

Nine Worlds. But in the back of my mind lurked an even deeper fear. I was about to meet the Wolf at last. That realization dredged up every nightmare I'd ever had about glowing blue eyes, white fangs, feral snarls in the darkness.

Sitting next to me, Sam kept her ax across her lap, where the dwarves could see it. Blitzen fussed with his yellow ascot, as if he could intimidate our hosts with his wardrobe. Hearthstone practiced making his new staff appear and disappear. If he did it right, the staff shot into his hand out of nowhere, like a bouquet of flowers spring-loaded in a magician's sleeve. If he did it wrong, he goosed Blitzen or whopped me upside the back of the head.

After a few hours and a dozen staff-induced concussions, the boat shuddered like we'd hit a crosscurrent. From the bow, Fjalar announced, "It won't be long now. We've entered Amsvartnir—Pitch-Black Bay."

"Gee"—I looked at the inky waves—"why do they call it that?"

The clouds broke. The full moon, pale and silver, peered down at us from a starless void. In front of us, fog and moonlight wove together, forming a coastline. I'd never hated the full moon so much.

"Lyngvi," Fjalar announced. "The Isle of Heather, prison of the Wolf."

The island looked like the caldera of an ancient volcano—a flattened cone maybe fifty feet above sea level. I'd always thought of heather as purple, but the rocky slopes were carpeted with ghostly white flowers.

"If that's heather," I said, "there sure is a lot of it."

Fjalar cackled. "It's a magical plant, my friend—used to ward off evil and keep ghosts at bay. What better prison for Fenris Wolf than an island entirely ringed with the stuff?"

Sam rose. "If Fenris is as big as I've heard, shouldn't we be able to see him by now?"

"Oh, no," Fjalar said. "You have to go ashore for that. Fenris lies bound in the center of the island like a runestone in a bowl."

I glanced at Hearthstone. I doubted he could read Fjalar's lips behind that bushy beard, but I didn't like the reference to a runestone in a bowl. I remembered the other meaning of perthro: a dice-rolling cup. I didn't want to run blindly into that caldera and hope for Yahtzee.

When we were about ten feet from the beach, the keel of the boat ground against a sandbar. The sound reminded me unpleasantly of the night my mother died—our apartment door creaking just before it burst open.

“Out you go!” Fjalar said cheerfully. “Enjoy your walking tour. Just head over the ridge there. I think you’ll find the Wolf well worth the trip!”

Maybe it was my imagination, but my nostrils filled with the smell of smoke and wet animal fur. My new einherji heart was testing the limits of how fast it could beat.

If it hadn’t been for my friends, I’m not sure I would’ve had the courage to disembark. Hearthstone leaped over the side first. Sam and Blitzen followed. Not wanting to be stuck on the boat with lobster dwarf and his jerky-eating brother, I swung my legs overboard. The waist-deep water was so cold I imagined I would be singing soprano for the rest of the week.

I slogged onto the beach, and a wolf’s howl split my eardrums.

Now, sure...I’d been expecting a wolf. Ever since childhood, wolves had terrified me, so I’d tried my best to gather my courage. But Fenris’s howl was unlike anything I’d ever heard—a note of pure rage so deep it seemed to shake me apart, breaking my molecules into random amino acids and icy Ginnungagap run-off.

Safe in their boat, the two dwarves cackled with glee.

“I should have mentioned,” Fjalar called to us, “the ride back is a little more expensive. All your valuables, please. Gather them together in one of your bags. Toss them to me. Otherwise, we’ll leave you here.”

Blitzen cursed. “They’ll leave us here anyway. That’s what they do.”

At the moment, heading inland to confront Fenris Wolf was very low on my wish list. At the top of my wish list was: *Cry and Plead for the Treacherous Dwarves to Take Me Back to Boston.*

My voice quavered, but I tried to act more courageous than I felt.

“Get lost,” I told the dwarves. “We don’t need you anymore.”

Fjalar and Gjalar exchanged looks. Already their boat was drifting farther away.

“Didn’t you hear the Wolf?” Fjalar spoke more slowly, as if he’d overestimated my intelligence. “You’re stuck on that island. With Fenris. That’s a bad thing.”

“Yeah, we know,” I said.

“The Wolf will eat you!” Fjalar cried. “Bound or not, he will *eat* you. At dawn the island will disappear and take you with it!”

“Thanks for the lift,” I said. “Pleasant trip back.”

Fjalar flung up his hands. “Idiots! Suit yourself. We’ll collect your valuables from your skeletal remains next year! Come on, Gjalar, back to

the docks. We might have time to pick up another load of tourists.”

Gjalar revved the motor. The longship turned and disappeared into the darkness.

I faced my friends. I got the feeling they wouldn’t mind another rousing speech like, *We’re a family of empty cups and we will dominate!*

“Well,” I said, “after running from an army of dwarves, facing a monster squirrel, killing three giant sisters, and butchering a pair of talking goats...how bad can Fenris Wolf be?”

“Very bad,” Sam and Blitz said in unison.

Hearthstone made two *okay* signs, crossed them at the wrists, and flicked them apart—the sign for *awful*.

“Right.” I pulled my sword from pendant form. The blade’s glow made the heather look even paler and more ghostly. “Jack, you ready?”

“Dude,” said the sword, “I was *forged* ready. Still, I get the feeling we’re walking into a trap here.”

“Show of hands,” I asked my friends, “is anybody surprised by that?”

Nobody raised their hand.

“Okay, cool,” said Jack. “As long as you realize you’ll probably all die in agony and start Ragnarok, I’m down. Let’s do this!”



## The Small Bad Wolf

I REMEMBER THE FIRST TIME I saw Plymouth Rock.

My reaction was, “That’s *it*? ”

Same with the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia and the Empire State Building in New York—up close and personal, they seemed smaller than I’d imagined, not worth the hype.

That’s how I felt when I saw Fenris Wolf.

I’d heard all these terrible stories about him: the gods were too scared to feed him; he could break the strongest chains; he’d eaten Tyr’s hand; he was going to swallow the sun on Doomsday; he was going to devour Odin in a single bite. I expected a wolf bigger than King Kong with flame-thrower breath, death-ray eyes, and laser nostrils.

What I got instead was a Wolf the size of a wolf.

We stood at the top of the ledge, looking down into the valley where Fenris sat calmly on his haunches. He was larger than an average Labrador retriever, but definitely no bigger than me. His legs were long and muscular, built for running. His shaggy gray coat swirled with tufts of black. Nobody would’ve called him *cute*—not with those gleaming white fangs, or the bones littering the ground around his paws—but he was a handsome animal.

I'd been hoping to find the Wolf lying on his side, hog-tied and fastened to the ground with nails, staples, duct tape, and Krazy Glue. Instead, the golden rope Gleipnir restrained him more like the leg irons used to transport criminals. The glimmering cord was tied around all four of his ankle joints, allowing enough slack for the Wolf to shuffle around. Part of the rope had apparently once been tied around the Wolf's snout like a muzzle. That section now fell across his chest in a loose loop. The rope didn't even appear to be anchored to the ground. I wasn't sure what was keeping Fenris from leaving the island unless there was one of those doggy no-no invisible fences around the perimeter.

All in all, if I were the god Tyr, getting my hand bit off so the other gods would have time to bind the Wolf, I would've been pretty torqued off at this shoddy work. Didn't the Aesir have *one* decent god of knots?

I glanced at my friends. "Where's the real Fenris? That has to be a decoy, right?"

"No." Sam's knuckles whitened on the handle of her ax. "That's him. I can sense it."

The Wolf turned toward the sound of our voices. His eyes shone with a familiar blue light that sent a xylophone mallet down the back of my rib cage.

"Well." His voice was deep and rich. His black lips curled in a very human sneer. "Who do we have here? Have the gods sent me a snack?"

I revised my impression of the Wolf. Maybe his size was ordinary. Maybe he didn't sneeze laser beams. But his eyes were colder and more intelligent than any predator I'd ever encountered—animal or human. His snout quivered as if he could smell the fear on my breath. And his voice... his voice flowed over me like molasses, dangerously smooth and sweet. I remembered my first feast in Valhalla, when the thanes didn't want Sam to speak in her defense because they feared the silver tongue of Loki's children. Now I understood.

The last thing I wanted to do was approach the Wolf. Yet his tone said, *Come on down. We're all friends here.*

The entire caldera was maybe a hundred yards across, which meant the Wolf was much closer than I would've liked. The ground sloped gently, but the heather was slick under my feet. I was terrified I might slip and slide right between the Wolf's paws.

“I’m Magnus Chase.” My voice was *not* as smooth as molasses. I forced myself to meet Fenris’s gaze. “We have an appointment.”

The Wolf bared his teeth. “We do indeed, son of Frey. Vanir-spawn have such an interesting scent. Normally I only get to devour the children of Thor, or Odin, or my old friend Tyr.”

“Sorry to disappoint.”

“Oh, not at all.” The wolf paced, the rope gleaming between his feet, barely slowing his gait. “I’m quite pleased. I’ve been waiting a long time for this.”

On my left, Hearthstone banged his white oak staff against the rocks. The heather plants glowed brighter, a fine silvery mist rising from them like a lawn sprinkler system. With his free hand, Hearth signed to me, *Flowers make the prison. Stay within.*

Fenris Wolf chuckled. “The elf is wise. Not powerful enough—not *nearly* powerful enough to face me—but he is right about the heather. I can’t stand the stuff. Funny, though...how many brave mortals choose to leave its safety and come within my reach. They want to test their skill against me, or perhaps they simply want to make sure I am still bound.” The Wolf leered at Blitzen. “Your father was one of those. A noble dwarf with the best of intentions. He approached me. He died. His bones are around here somewhere.”

Blitzen let loose a guttural scream. Sam and I had to restrain him to keep him from charging the Wolf with his new harpoon.

“Quite sad, really,” the Wolf mused. “Bili was his name? He was right, of course. This ridiculous rope has been loosening for ages. At one time, I was completely unable to walk. After a few centuries, I managed to hobble. I still can’t cross the heather. The farther I move from the center of the island, the more the rope tightens and the more pain I endure. But it’s progress! The real breakthrough came...oh, a little over two years ago, when I finally managed to shake that cursed muzzle off my snout!”

Sam faltered. “Two years ago...”

The Wolf tilted his head. “That’s right, little sister. Surely you knew. I began whispering in the dreams of Odin—what a fine idea it would be to make you, the daughter of Loki, a Valkyrie! What a fine way to turn a potential enemy into a valuable friend.”

“No,” Sam said. “Odin would never listen to you.”

“Would he not?” The Wolf snarled with pleasure. “That’s the wonderful thing about you so-called *good* folk. You hear what you want to believe. You think your conscience is whispering to you when it is, perhaps, the Wolf instead. Oh, you have done very well, little sister, bringing Magnus to me—”

“I didn’t *bring* him to you!” Sam shouted. “And I’m not your little sister!”

“No? I smell the changeling blood in your veins. You could be powerful. You could make our father proud. Why do you fight it?”

The Wolf’s teeth were as sharp as ever, his leer just as vicious, but his voice filled with sympathy, disappointment, melancholy. His tone said *I could help you. I am your brother.*

Sam took a step forward. I grabbed her arm.

“Fenris,” I said, “you sent those wolves...the night my mother died.”

“Of course.”

“You wanted to kill me—”

“Now, why would I want that?” His blue eyes were worse than mirrors. They seemed to reflect back at me all my failures—my cowardice, my weakness, my selfishness in running away when my mother needed me most. “You were valuable to me, Magnus. But you needed...seasoning. Hardship is wonderful for cultivating power. And look! You have succeeded—the first child of Frey strong enough to find the Sword of Summer. You have brought me the means to escape these bonds at last.”

The world spun beneath me. I felt like I was back on Stanley the horse—plummeting with no reins, no saddle, no control. All this time, I’d assumed Fenris wanted me dead. That’s why his wolves had attacked our apartment. But his real target had been my mother. He’d killed her to affect me. That idea was even worse than believing my mom had died to protect me. She’d died so this monster could forge me into his harbinger—a demigod capable of attaining the Sword of Summer.

I was filled with so much rage I couldn’t focus.

In my hand, the sword began to hum. I realized how long Jack had been silent. He pulled at my arm, tugging me forward.

“Jack,” I muttered. “Jack, what are you—?”

The Wolf laughed. “You see? The Sword of Summer is destined to cut these bonds. You cannot stop it. The children of Frey have never been fighters, Magnus Chase. You can’t hope to control the blade, much less

fight me with it. Your usefulness is at an end. Surt will arrive soon. The blade will fly to his hands.”

“Mistake...” Jack murmured, tugging to escape my grip. “Mistake to bring me here.”

“Yes,” the Wolf purred. “Yes, it was, my fine blade. Surt thinks all of this was *his* idea, you understand. He’s an imperfect tool. Like most fire giants, he’s a lot of hot air, more bluster than brains, but he will serve his purpose. He’ll be very happy to take possession of you.”

“Jack, you’re my sword now,” I said, though I could barely hold on with both hands.

“Cut the cord...” Jack hummed insistently. “Cut the cord.”

“Do it, Magnus Chase,” said Fenris. “Why wait for Surt? Cut me loose of your own free will and I will be grateful. Perhaps I would even spare you and your friends.”

Blitzen growled even better than the Wolf. From his pack, he pulled out the new string, Andskoti. “I was ready to bind this mutt. Now I think I might just strangle him.”

“I agree,” Samirah said. “He dies.”

I wanted more than anything to join them. I wanted to charge the beast and run him through. The Sword of Summer was supposed to be the sharpest blade in the Nine Worlds. Surely it could cut wolf hide.

I think we would’ve done it, but Hearthstone swept his staff in front of us. The runestone perthro flared with gold light.

*Look.* The command was more a tremor than a sound. I turned and stared in amazement at Hearthstone.

*The bones.* He didn’t use sign language. He didn’t speak. His thought was simply *there*, clearing my mind like wind through fog.

I looked again at the skeletons littering the ground. All of them had been heroes—the children of Odin, Thor, or Tyr. Dwarves, humans, elves. They’d all been tricked, enraged, enchanted by Fenris. They’d all died.

Hearthstone was the only one of us who couldn’t hear the Wolf’s voice. He was the only one thinking clearly.

Suddenly the sword was easier to control. It didn’t stop fighting me, but I felt the balance shift slightly in my favor.

“I’m not freeing you,” I told the Wolf. “And I don’t need to fight you. We’ll wait for Surt. We’ll stop him.”

The Wolf sniffed the air. “Oh...too late for that. You don’t need to fight me? Poor mortal...I don’t need to fight you, either. There are others to do that for me. As I said, good folk are so easy to manipulate, so ready to do my work for me. Here are some now!”

Across the island, a voice yelled, “STOP!”

At the opposite side of the ridge stood our old friend Gunilla with a Valkyrie on either side of her. Fanning out to her left and right were my old hallmates: T.J., Halfborn, Mallory, and X the half-troll.

“Caught in the act of aiding the enemy,” Gunilla said. “You’ve signed your own death warrants!”



## I Hate Signing My Own Death Warrant

“WELL, WELL,” said the Wolf. “I haven’t had this much company since my binding party.”

Gunilla gripped her spear. She didn’t look at the Wolf, as if ignoring him might make him go away.

“Thomas Jefferson, Jr.,” she said, “you and your hallmates take the prisoners. Go around the edges, obviously. Slow and careful.”

T.J. didn’t look happy about it, but he nodded. His army jacket was buttoned up tight. His bayonet gleamed in the moonlight. Mallory Keen gave me the stink eye, but that could have been her version of a happy greeting. The two of them went left, picking their way across the rim of the crater while the three Valkyries kept their spears pointed at Fenris.

X lumbered to the right, followed by Halfborn, who was twirling his battle-axes and whistling under his breath, as if this was a pleasant stroll through a field of fallen enemies.

“Sam,” I muttered, “if we’re taken—”

“I know.”

“No one will be here to stop Surt.”

“I know.”

“We can take them,” Blitz said. “They’re not wearing armor, much less fashionable armor.”

"No," I said. "These are my shield bro—my shield siblings. Let me try talking to them."

Hearth signed, *Crazy. You?*

The beauty of sign language: He could've meant *Are you crazy? Or I'm crazy. Just like you!* I decided to interpret it as a show of support.

Fenris Wolf sat on his haunches and tried to scratch his ear, which wasn't possible with the cord binding his legs.

He sniffed the air and grinned at me. "Interesting company you keep, Magnus Chase. Someone is hiding, but I can smell him. Which one is he, eh? Perhaps I will get a feast today after all!"

I glanced at Sam. She looked just as mystified as I felt.

"Sorry, fuzzball," I said. "No idea what you're talking about."

Fenris laughed. "We shall see. I wonder if he will dare to show his true face."

"Chase!" Gunilla plucked a hammer from her bandolier. "Do not speak with the Wolf again or I will cave in your skull."

"Gunilla," I said, "great to see you again too. Surt is on his way right now. We don't have time for this."

"Oh? Have you made common cause with the fire lord who killed you? Or perhaps that was part of the plan from the beginning—to get you into Valhalla."

Sam sighed. "For a child of Thor, you think too much."

"And you, daughter of Loki, listen too little. Jefferson, hurry it up!"

My hallmates got to either side of us.

Mallory made a *tsk-tsk* sound. "You led us on quite a chase, Chase."

"Clever," I said. "How long have you been waiting to use that line?"

Mallory smirked.

Next to her, X wiped beads of green sweat from his forehead. "Wolf's rope is loose. This is not good."

From across the valley, Gunilla yelled, "No fraternizing! I want them in chains!"

T.J. dangled four sets of handcuffs from his finger. "Here's the thing, Magnus: Gunilla made it clear that if we don't prove our loyalty to Valhalla by apprehending you, we will spend the next hundred years in the boiler room shoveling coal. So consider yourself under arrest, blah, blah, blah."

Halfborn grinned. "But the *other* thing is: we're Vikings. We're pretty bad at following orders. So consider yourself free again."

T.J. let the handcuffs slip from his finger. “Oops.”

My spirits lifted. “You mean—”

“He means, you idiot,” Mallory said, “that we’re here to help.”

“I love you guys.”

“What do you need us to do?” T.J. asked.

Sam nodded to Blitzen. “Our dwarf has a rope to rebind the Wolf. If we can—”

“Enough!” Gunilla shouted. On either side, her Valkyrie lieutenants readied their spears. “I will take you *all* back in chains if I must!”

Fenris howled with pleasure. “That would be delightful to watch. Unfortunately, Valkyrie, you are too slow. My other friends have arrived, and they won’t be taking any prisoners.”

X gazed toward the south, his neck muscles rippling like freshly poured cement. “There.”

At the same moment, Hearthstone pointed with his staff, the whole length of white oak suddenly burning with gold fire.

On the ridge to the right, between the Valkyries and us, a dozen fire giants marched into view. Each stood about ten feet tall. They wore leather scale armor, carried swords the size of plow blades, and had various axes and knives hanging from their belts. Their complexions were an assortment of volcanic colors—ash, lava, pumice, obsidian. The fields of heather may have been noxious to the Wolf, but the stuff didn’t seem to bother the fire giants. Wherever they stepped, the plants burned and smoked.

In the middle of their line stood Satan’s fashion consultant himself, the fire lord Surt, wearing a trim-cut three-piece suit of chain mail, a tie, and a dress shirt that appeared to be woven from flame—elegantly accessorized with a burning scimitar in his hand. He looked pretty good, despite the fact that his nose was still cut off. That fact, at least, made me happy.

Blitzen clenched his teeth. “That’s my design. He *stole* my design.”

“Magnus Chase!” Surt’s voice boomed. “I see you have brought my new sword. Excellent!”

Jack almost leaped out of my hands. I must have looked ridiculous trying to keep him under control, like a fireman wrestling a high-pressure hose.

“My master...” Jack said. “He shall be my master.”

Surt laughed. “Surrender the sword and I will kill you quickly.” He sneered at Gunilla and her two lieutenants. “As for Odin’s wenches, I make

no promises.”

Fenris Wolf rose and stretched. “Lord Surt, as much as I love posturing and threats, can we move things along? Moonlight is a-wasting.”

“T.J.,” I said.

“Yeah?”

“You asked how you could help. My friends and I need to rebind Fenris Wolf. Can you keep those fire giants busy?”

T.J. smiled. “I charged uphill against seventeen hundred Confederates. I think I can handle a dozen fire giants.”

He called across the valley, “Captain Gunilla, are you with us? Because I’d rather not fight another Civil War.”

Gunilla scanned the army of fire giants. Her expression soured, as if she found them even more repugnant than she found me. She raised her spear.

“Death to Surt! Death to the enemies of Asgard!”

She and her lieutenants charged at the giants.

“I guess we’re in business,” T.J. said. “Fix bayonets!”



## Whose Idea Was It to Make This Wolf Unkillable?

VALHALLA'S DAILY COMBAT training finally made sense to me. After the terror and chaos of war in the hotel courtyard, I was more prepared to face Fenris Wolf and the fire giants, even if they didn't have AK-47s or chests painted with COME AT ME, BRO!

I was still having trouble controlling the sword, though. The only thing that helped: Jack now seemed divided between wanting to fly to Surt's hand or flying toward the Wolf. Lucky for me, I needed to approach the Wolf.

Sam knocked a giant's thrown ax out of the air. "Rebinding Fenris—any idea how we're doing that?"

"Yes," I said. "Maybe. Not really."

A fire giant charged in our direction. Blitzen was so angry—between the Wolf gloating about his dad's death and Surt stealing his fashion ideas—that he howled like Crazy Alice in Chinatown and rammed his harpoon right through the giant's gut. The fire giant stumbled off, belching flames and taking the harpoon with him.

Hearthstone pointed to the Wolf. *Idea*, he signed. *Follow me*.

"I thought we needed to stay in the heather," I recalled.

Hearthstone raised his staff. Across the ground at his feet, a rune spread like a shadow:



Heather bloomed around it, sprouting new tendrils.

“*Algiz*,” Sam marveled. “The rune of shielding. I’ve never seen it used.”

I felt as if I were seeing Hearthstone for the first time. He didn’t stumble. He didn’t faint. He strode confidently forward, the flowers expanding before him like an unrolling carpet. Not only was Hearth immune to the wolf’s voice, his rune magic was literally redrawing the boundaries of Fenris’s prison.

We inched into the valley, following Hearthstone. On the right side of the island, my einherjar friends clashed with Surt’s forces. Halfborn Gunderson buried his ax in the breastplate of a giant. X picked up another fire-breather and tossed him off the side of the ridge. Mallory and T.J. fought back-to-back—jabbing and slashing and dodging blasts of flame.

Gunilla and her two Valkyrie lieutenants were fighting Surt himself. Between the shining white spears and the flaming sword, their combat was almost too bright to watch.

My friends fought valiantly, but they were outnumbered two-to-one. The fire giants didn’t want to die. Even the one Blitzen had harpooned was still staggering around, trying to blowtorch the einherjar with his bad breath.

“We have to hurry,” I said.

“Open to suggestions, kid,” Blitzen said.

Fenris paced expectantly. He didn’t seem concerned to see us shuffling toward him on a carpet of heather, collectively armed with an ax, a glowing white staff, an uncooperative sword, and a ball of string.

“By all means, come down,” he said. “Bring that blade closer.”

Blitzen huffed. “I’ll tie him up. Hearth can guard me. Magnus and Sam—you two keep him from biting off my head for a few minutes.”

“Terrible idea,” Sam said.

“Got a better one?” Blitz asked.

“I do!” Fenris lunged. He could’ve torn my throat out, but that wasn’t his plan. His front paws passed on either side of my sword. Jack cheerfully cooperated, slicing the rope in half.

Sam brought down her ax between the Wolf's ears, but Fenris leaped out of the way. His back legs were still hobbled, but his front paws were free. The Wolf's coat steamed from contact with the heather. Blisters swelled all over his legs, but he sounded too delighted to care.

"Oh, that's wonderful," he crowed. "Just the back legs now, please. Then we can get Ragnarok underway!"

All the rage that had built inside me for two years boiled to the surface.

"Blitz," I said, "do what you need to do. I'm going to knock this mutt's teeth out."

I ran at the Wolf—possibly my worst idea ever. Sam charged in next to me.

Fenris might have been the size of a normal wolf, but even with his back legs hobbled, his speed and strength were impossible to match.

As soon as I stepped from the edge of the heather, he became a blur of claws and teeth. I stumbled and fell, a line of deep cuts across my chest. Fenris would've torn me open if Sam's ax hadn't slammed him aside.

The Wolf snarled. "You can't hurt me. The *gods* couldn't hurt me. Don't you think they would've slit my throat if they could have? My destiny is fixed. Until Ragnarok, I am un-killable!"

"Must be nice." I stumbled to my feet. "But it won't keep me from trying."

Unfortunately, Jack wasn't helping. Every time I tried to attack, the sword turned and swerved, doing its best to cut the rope around the Wolf's back legs. My fight with the Wolf was more like a game of keep-away.

Blitzen lunged forward, the end of Andskoti tied in a noose. He tried to snare the Wolf's hindquarters, but he might as well have been moving in slow motion. Fenris stepped aside, dodging another strike from Sam's ax. The Wolf slashed Blitzen across the throat and the dwarf fell facedown. The string rolled away.

"NO!" I yelled.

I moved toward Blitzen, but Hearthstone was faster.

He slammed his staff across Fenris's skull. Golden fire blazed. The Wolf clambered away, whining in pain. A rune mark now steamed on his forehead—a simple arrow seared into the gray fur:



“*Tiwaz?*” The Wolf snarled. “You *dare* attack me with the rune of Tyr?” The wolf lunged at Hearthstone but seemed to hit an invisible barrier. He stumbled and howled.

Sam appeared next to me. Her ax was gone. Her left eye was swollen shut and her hijab had been cut to shreds. “Hearth used the rune of sacrifice,” she said, her voice quavering. “To save Blitz.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

Hearth collapsed to his knees, leaning against his staff. Still he managed to put himself between the dwarf and the Wolf.

“You sacrifice your strength to shield your friend?” The Wolf laughed. “Fine. Enjoy your spellwork. The dwarf is already dead. Your own rune magic has doomed you. You can watch while I deal with my other tasty prey.”

He bared his fangs at us.

Across the field, the battle was not going well.

One of Gunilla’s Valkyries sprawled lifeless on the rocks. The other one fell, her armor burning from Surt’s sword. Gunilla faced the Fire Lord alone, swinging her spear like a whip of light, but she couldn’t last. Her clothes smoldered. Her shield was charred and cracked.

The einherjar were surrounded. Halfborn had lost one of his axes. He was covered with so many burns and gashes I didn’t understand how he could still be alive, but he just kept fighting, laughing as he charged the giants. Mallory was on one knee, cursing as she parried attacks from three giants at once. T.J. swung his rifle wildly. Even X looked tiny compared to the enemies now looming over him.

My head throbbed. I could feel my einherji powers at work, trying to close the cuts on my chest, but I knew Fenris could kill me faster than I could possibly heal.

The Wolf sniffed, no doubt smelling my weakness.

“Ah, well,” he chuckled. “A good try, Magnus, but the sons of Frey never were fighters. All that’s left for me to do now is devour my enemies. I love this part!”



## I Hate This Part

THE STRANGEST THINGS can save your life. Like lions. Or bulletproof ascots.

Fenris lunged at my face. I cleverly escaped by falling on my butt. A blurred shape launched itself at the Wolf and knocked him aside.

Two animals tumbled across the bone yard in a whirl of fangs and claws. When they separated, I realized Fenris was facing a she-lion with a swollen eye.

“Sam?” I yelled.

“Get the rope.” She kept her gaze on her enemy. “I need to have a talk with my brother.”

The fact that she could speak in lion form freaked me out even more than the fact that she had a lion form. Her lips moved in a very human way. Her eyes were the same color. Her voice was still Sam’s voice.

Fenris’s fur stood up on the back of his neck. “So you accept your birthright as you are about to die, little sister?”

“I accept who I am,” Sam said. “But not the way you mean. I am Samirah al-Abbas. Samirah of the Lion.” She leaped at the Wolf. They clawed, bit, kicked, and howled. I’d heard the term *fur flying*, but I’d never realized what a horrific thing it could be. The two beasts literally tried to tear each other apart. And one of those beasts was a friend of mine.

My first instinct was to charge into battle. But that wouldn't work. Freya had told me that killing was the least of the sword's powers. *The sons of Frey have never been fighters*, the Wolf had said. So what was I?

Blitzen rolled over, groaning. Hearthstone frantically checked the dwarf's neck.

The ascot glittered. Somehow, it had turned from yellow silk to woven metal, saving Blitzen's throat in the process. It was honest-to-Frigg bulletproof neckwear.

I couldn't help grinning. Blitz was alive. He had played to his strength.

He wasn't a fighter. Neither was I. But there were other ways to win a battle.

I snatched up the ball of string. It felt like woven snow—impossibly soft and cold. In my other hand, the sword became still.

"What are we doing?" Jack asked.

"Figuring stuff out."

"Oh, cool." The blade quivered as if stretching after a nap. "How's that going?"

"Better." I stabbed the end of the blade into the ground. Jack did not try to fly away. "Surf may get you someday," I said, "but he doesn't understand your power. I do now. We're a team."

I looped the string's noose around Jack's hilt and pulled it tight. The battle seemed to fade around me. I stopped thinking about how to fight the Wolf. He couldn't be killed—at least not now, not by me.

Instead, I focused on the warmth I felt whenever I healed someone: the power of growth and life—the power of Frey. The Norns had told me nine days ago: *The sun must go east*.

This place was all about night, winter, and silver moonlight. I needed to be the summer sun.

Fenris Wolf noticed the change in the air. He swiped at Sam and sent her tumbling across the lawn of bones. His snout was shredded with claw marks. The rune of Tyr glistened ugly and black on his forehead.

"What are you up to, Magnus? None of that!" He lunged, but before he could reach me, he fell out of the air, twisting and howling in pain.

Light surrounded me—the same golden aura as when I'd healed Sam and Hearthstone in Jotunheim. It wasn't hot like the fires of Muspellheim. It

wasn't particularly bright, but it obviously pained the Wolf. He snarled and paced, squinting at me like I'd become a spotlight.

"Stop that!" he howled. "Are you trying to *annoy* me to death?"

Sam the lion struggled to her feet. She had a nasty cut on her flank. Her face looked like she'd rear-ended a tractor-trailer. "Magnus, what are you doing?"

"Bringing the summer."

The cuts on my chest mended. My strength returned. My father was the god of light and warmth. Wolves were creatures of darkness. The power of Frey could constrain Fenris just as it constrained the extremes of fire and ice.

Sticking up from the ground, Jack hummed with satisfaction. "Summer. Yeah, I remember summer."

I rolled out Andskoti until it trailed Jack like a kite string.

I faced the Wolf. "An old dwarf once told me that the most powerful crafting materials are paradoxes. This rope is made of them. But I've got one more—the final paradox that will bind you: the Sword of Summer, a weapon that wasn't designed to be a weapon, a blade that is best used by letting go of it."

I willed Jack to fly, trusting he would do the rest.

He could have sliced the last of the Wolf's bonds. He could have flown across the battlefield straight into Surt's hands, but he didn't. He zipped under the Wolf's belly, threading the cord Andskoti around his legs faster than Fenris could react, binding him and toppling him.

Fenris's howl shook the island. "No! I will not—!"

The sword zipped around his snout. Jack tied off the rope in an aerial pirouette then floated back to me, his blade glowing with pride. "How'd I do, boss?"

"Jack," I said, "you are one awesome sword."

"Well, I know that," he said. "But how about that rope-work, huh? That's a perfect stevedore's knot right there, and I don't even have hands."

Sam stumbled toward us. "You did it! You—ugh."

Her lion form melted into regular old Sam—badly injured, face battered, her side soaked with blood. Before she could fall, I grabbed her and dragged her away from the Wolf. Even fully bound, he thrashed and frothed at the mouth. I didn't want to be any closer to him than I had to be.

Hearthstone staggered after me, holding up Blitzen. The four of us fell together on a bed of heather.

“Alive,” I said. “I wasn’t expecting that.”

Our moment of triumph lasted about...well, one moment.

Then the sounds of battle became louder and clearer around us, as if a curtain had been ripped away. Hearthstone’s shielding magic may have given us extra protection against the Wolf, but it had also sealed us off from the fight with the fire giants...and my einherjar friends weren’t doing well.

“To the Valkyrie!” T.J. shouted. “Hurry!”

He stumbled across the ridge, bayoneting a fire giant and trying to reach Gunilla. All this time, while we’d been dealing with the Wolf, the Valkyrie captain had been holding off Surt. Now she was on the ground, her spear held weakly above her as Surt raised his scimitar.

Mallory staggered around weaponless, too far away and too bloodied to help. X was trying to dig his way out from beneath a pile of giant corpses. Halfborn Gunderson sat bloody and unmoving, his back propped against a rock.

I processed this in a split second. Just as quickly, I realized Hearth, Blitz, Sam, and I wouldn’t be there in time to make a difference.

Nevertheless, I gripped my sword and rose. I staggered toward Gunilla. Our eyes met across the field, her last expression one of resignation and anger: *Make it count.*

The fire lord brought down his scimitar.



## Sacrifices

I DON'T KNOW WHY IT BROKE ME SO BADLY.

I didn't even like Gunilla.

But when I saw Surt standing over her lifeless body, his eyes smoldering in triumph, I wanted to fall down in the pile of bones and stay there until Ragnarok.

Gunilla was dead. Her lieutenants were dead. I didn't even know their names, but they'd sacrificed their lives to buy me time. Halfborn was dead or dying. The other einherjar were not much better off. Sam and Blitz and Hearth were in no shape to fight.

And Surt was still on his feet, as strong as ever, his burning sword ready. Three of his fire giants were also still alive and armed.

After all we'd been through, the fire lord could kill me, take my sword, and cut the wolf free.

Judging from the smile on his face, Surt expected to do just that.

"I am impressed," he admitted. "The Wolf told me you had potential. I don't think even Fenris expected you to do this well."

The Wolf thrashed in his new magic bonds.

A few feet from the fire lord, T.J. crouched, his bayonet ready. He glanced at me, waiting for a sign. I knew he was ready to charge one last

time, distract the giants if it would help me, but I couldn't let another person die.

"Go now," I told Surt. "Go back to Muspellheim."

The fire lord threw back his head and laughed. "Brave to the end! I think not, Magnus Chase. I think you will burn."

He thrust out his hand. A column of fire shot toward me.

I stood my ground.

I imagined being with my mom in the Blue Hills on the first day of spring, the sunlight warming my skin, gently thawing three months of cold and darkness out of my system.

My mom turned to me, her smile luminous: *This is where I am, Magnus. In this moment. With you.*

A sense of serenity anchored me. I remembered my mom once telling me how the town houses in Back Bay, like our family's ancestral home, had been built on landfill. Every so often, engineers had to sink new pylons beneath the foundations to keep the buildings from collapsing. I felt like I'd had my pylons reinforced. I was solid.

Surt's flames rolled over me. They lost their intensity. They were nothing but ghostly flickers of warm orange, as harmless as butterflies.

At my feet, the heather began to bloom—white flowers spreading across the landscape, reclaiming the trampled and burned areas where Surt's warriors had walked, soaking up the blood, covering the corpses of the fallen giants.

"The battle is over," I announced. "I consecrate this ground in the name of Frey."

The words sent a shockwave in every direction. Swords, daggers, and axes flew from the fire giants' hands. T.J.'s rifle spun from his grasp. Even the weapons lying on the ground were expelled from the island, blasted into the darkness like shrapnel.

The only one left holding a weapon was me.

Without his flaming scimitar, Surt didn't look so confident. "Tricks and childish magic," he snarled. "You cannot defeat me, Magnus Chase. That sword will be mine!"

"Not today."

I threw the blade. It spiraled toward Surt, passing over the giant's head. Surt grabbed for it and missed.

"What was that?" The giant laughed. "An attack?"

“No,” I said. “That was your exit.”

Behind Surt, Jack slashed the air, ripping the fabric between the worlds. A zigzag of fire burned on the ridge. My ears popped. As if someone had shot out the window in an airplane’s pressurized cabin, Surt and the other fire giants were sucked screaming into the rift, which closed behind them.

“Bye!” Jack called. “Catch you later!”

Except for the outraged snarling of the Wolf, the island was silent.

I stumbled across the field. I fell to my knees in front of Gunilla. I could tell immediately that the Valkyrie captain was gone. Her blue eyes stared into the dark. Her bandolier was empty of hammers. Her white spear lay broken across her chest.

My eyes stung. “I’m sorry.”

For five hundred years she’d been in Valhalla, collecting the souls of the dead, preparing for the final battle. I remembered how she’d scolded me: *Even gazing upon Asgard, you have no sense of reverence.*

In death, her face seemed full of wonder and awe. I hoped she was gazing upon Asgard the way she wanted it to be—filled with Aesir, all the lights burning in her father’s mansion.

“Magnus,” called T.J., “we have to go.”

He and Mallory were struggling to carry Halfborn Gunderson. X had managed to dig his way out from under the fire giant corpse pile and was now carrying the two other fallen Valkyries. Blitz and Hearthstone stumbled along together, Sam close behind.

I picked up the body of the Valkyrie captain. She was not light, and my strength was fading again.

“We have to hurry.” T.J. spoke as gently as he could, but I heard the urgency in his tone.

The ground was shifting under my feet. I realized my glowing aura had done more than blind the wolf. The sunlight had affected the texture of the island. The island was supposed to disappear at dawn. My magic had hastened the process, causing the ground to dissolve into spongy mist.

“Only seconds,” Sam gasped. “Go.”

The last thing I felt capable of was a burst of speed, but somehow, carrying Gunilla, I followed T.J. as he led the way to the shore.



## One More, for a Friend

“WE’VE GOT A FREY BOAT!” YELLED T.J.

I had no idea what a Frey boat was. I didn’t see any boat on the beach, but I was too stunned and exhausted to ask questions. I felt like the extremes of heat and cold I’d tolerated my entire life were now taking revenge. My forehead burned with fever. My eyes felt close to boiling. My chest felt like a block of ice.

I plodded along. The ground became softer under my feet. The beach sank. The waves rushed in. My arm muscles screamed under the weight of the Valkyrie captain.

I started veering sideways. Sam grabbed my arm. “Just a little farther, Magnus. Stay with me.”

We got to the beach. T.J. pulled out a piece of cloth like a handkerchief and tossed it into the surf. Immediately the cloth expanded, unfolding. By the count of ten, a full-size Viking warship bobbed in the surf with two oversize oars, a figure-head carved like a wild boar, and a green sail emblazoned with the Hotel Valhalla logo. Along the side of the prow, lettered in white, were the words: HOTEL VALHALLA COURTESY VEHICLE.

“In!” T.J. jumped aboard first and reached out to take Gunilla from me.

The wet sand pulled at my feet, but somehow I managed to get over the rail. Sam made sure everyone else got in safely. Then she climbed aboard.

A deep hum reverberated across the island, like a bass amp turned to maximum. The Isle of Heather sank beneath the black waves. The ship's sail tacked by itself. The oars began to row, and the ship turned west.

Blitzen and Hearthstone collapsed at the bow. They started arguing with each other about which of them had taken the stupider risks, but they were so tired the debate deteriorated into a halfhearted poking contest, like a couple of second graders.

Sam knelt next to Gunilla. She folded the Valkyrie captain's arms across her chest and gently closed Gunilla's blue eyes.

"The others?" I asked.

X lowered his head.

He had set the two Valkyries in the stern, but it was clear they were gone. He folded their arms like Gunilla's. "Brave warriors." He touched their foreheads with tenderness.

"I didn't know them," I said.

"Margaret and Irene." Sam's voice was unsteady. "They—they never liked me much, but...good Valkyries."

"Magnus," T.J. called from amidships, "we need you."

He and Mallory were kneeling next to Halfborn Gunderson, whose berserker strength had finally failed him. His chest was a nightmarish patchwork of cuts and burns. His left arm hung at an unnatural angle. His beard and hair were sprinkled with blood and small bits of heather.

"Good—fight," he wheezed.

"Don't talk, you big idiot!" Mallory sobbed. "How *dare* you get yourself hurt like this?"

He grinned sleepily. "Sorry...Mother."

"Hang in there," T.J. said. "We can get you back to Vahalla. Then if—if anything happens, you can be reborn."

I put my hand on Halfborn's shoulder. I sensed damage so severe I almost pulled away. It was like forcing myself to explore a bowl of glass shards.

"There's no time," I said. "We're losing him."

Mallory choked on tears. "Not an option. No. Halfborn Gunderson, I hate you so much."

He coughed. Blood flecked his lips. "I hate you too, Mallory Keen."

"Hold him still," I said. "I'll do what I can."

"Kid, think about this," Blitz said. "You're already weak."

“I have to.” I extended my senses, taking in Halfborn’s broken bones, his internal bleeding, his bruised organs. Fear washed over me. It was too much, too close to death. I needed help.

“Jack,” I called.

The sword hovered to my side. “Boss?”

“Halfborn is dying. I’ll need your strength to help heal him. You can do that?”

The sword hummed nervously. “Yeah. But boss, the second you take hold of me—”

“I know. I’ll be even more exhausted.”

“It’s not just binding the Wolf,” Jack warned. “I also helped with the aura of golden light, which was pretty cool if I do say so myself. And then there was the Peace of Frey.”

“The peace...” I realized he meant the shockwave that had disarmed everyone, but I didn’t have time to worry about that. “Fine. Yes. We have to act now.”

I grabbed the sword. My eyesight dimmed. If I hadn’t been sitting already, I would’ve fallen down. I fought against the nausea and dizziness and placed the sword flat against Halfborn’s chest.

Warmth flooded through me. Light turned Halfborn’s beard to red gold. I sent the last of my strength coursing through his veins, repairing damage, closing ruptures.

The next thing I remember, I was lying faceup on the deck, staring at a green sail rippling in the wind as my friends shook me and shouted my name.

Then I was standing in a sunlit meadow at the edge of a lake with blue sky above me. A warm breeze ruffled my hair.

Somewhere behind me, a man’s voice said, “Welcome.”



## Don't Be a No-bro, Bro

HE LOOKED LIKE a Hollywood Viking. He looked more like Thor from the movies than Thor did.

Blond hair fell to his shoulders. His tan face, blue eyes, hawkish nose, and stubbly beard would've worked equally well on the red carpet or the beaches of Malibu.

He reclined on a throne of living tree branches, the seat draped with deer hide. Across his lap lay a sort of scepter—a stag's antler fitted with a leather grip.

When he smiled, I saw my own self-conscious smirk, the same crooked chin. He even had the same cowlick I always got above my right ear.

I understood why my mom would've fallen in love with him. It wasn't just because he was handsome, or because his faded jeans, flannel shirt, and hiking boots were exactly her style. He radiated warmth and tranquility. Every time I'd healed someone, every time I'd called on the power of Frey, I'd captured a fragment of this guy's aura.

"Dad," I said.

"Magnus." Frey rose. His eyes twinkled, but he didn't seem sure what to do with his arms. "I'm so glad to see you at last. I'd—I'd give you a hug, but I imagine that would not be welcome. I understand you need more time \_\_\_"

I charged in and gave him a bear hug.

That wasn't like me. I'm not a hugger, especially not with strangers.

But he wasn't a stranger. I knew him as well as I knew my mother. For the first time, I understood why my mom had been so insistent on taking me hiking and camping. Every time we were in the woods on a summer day, every time the sun came out from behind the clouds, Frey had been there.

Maybe I should have resented him, but I didn't. After losing my mother, I didn't have patience for grudges. My years on the street had taught me that it was pointless to whine and moan about what you could've had—what you deserved, what was fair. I was just happy to have this moment.

He cupped his hand gently on the back of my head. He smelled of campfire smoke, pine needles, and toasted s'mores. Did they have s'mores in Vanaheim?

It occurred to me why I must be here. I was dead. Or at least dying again.

I pulled away. "My friends—"

"Are safe," Frey assured me. "You pushed yourself to the verge of death healing the berserker, but he will live. So will you. You have done well, Magnus."

His praise made me uncomfortable. "Three Valkyries died. I almost lost every friend I had. All I did was bind the wolf with a new rope and send Surt back to Muspellheim—and Jack did all that work. It doesn't really change anything."

Frey laughed. "Magnus, you have changed *everything*. You, the wielder of the sword, are shaping the destiny of the Nine Worlds. As for the deaths of the Valkyries—that was a sacrifice they willingly made. Do not dishonor them by feeling guilt. You cannot prevent every death, any more than I can prevent each summer from becoming autumn...or any more than I can prevent my own fate at Ragnarok."

"Your fate..." I closed my fingers around the runestone, now back on its chain. "I have your sword. Couldn't you...?"

Frey shook his head. "No, son. As your Aunt Freya told you, I can never wield the Sword of Summer again. Ask the sword, if you want to be sure."

I pulled off the pendant. Jack sprang to life, spewing a tirade of insults I can't really repeat.

“And another thing!” he yelled. “Giving me away so you could marry a giantess? Dude, what was *that*? Blades before babes, you know what I’m saying?”

Frey smiled sadly. “Hello, old friend.”

“Oh, we’re friends again?” the sword demanded. “Nah. Nuh-uh. We’re done.” Jack paused. “Your son’s okay, though. I like him. As long as he’s not planning to trade me for a giantess’s hand in marriage.”

“That’s not on my to-do list,” I promised.

“Then we’re cool. But as for this sorry father of yours, this traitorous no-bro—”

I willed the sword back to pendant form. “No-bro?”

Frey shrugged. “I made my choice long ago. I surrendered the blade for the sake of love.”

“But on Ragnarok, you’ll die because you don’t have it.”

He held up the deer antler. “I will fight with this.”

“An animal horn?”

“Knowing your fate is one thing. Accepting it is another. I will do my duty. With this antler I will slay many giants, even Beli, one of their great generals. But you’re right. It won’t be enough to bring down Surt. In the end, I will die.”

“How can you be so calm about it?”

“Magnus...even gods can’t last forever. I don’t expend my energy trying to fight the change of seasons. I focus on making sure the days I have, and the season I oversee, are as joyful, rich, and plentiful as possible.” He touched my face. “But you already understand this. No child of Thor or Odin or even noble Tyr could have withstood Hel’s promises, Loki’s silver words. You did. Only a son of Frey, with the Sword of Summer, could choose to let go as you did.”

“Letting go...My mom...”

“Yes.” Frey retrieved something from his throne—a sealed ceramic jar about the size of a heart. He placed it in my hands. “You know what she would want?”

I couldn’t speak. I nodded, hoping my expression told Frey how grateful I was.

“You, my son, will bring hope to the Nine Worlds. You have heard the term Indian summer? You will be our last such season—a chance for warmth, light, and growth before the long winter of Ragnarok.”

“But...” I cleared my throat. “But no pressure.”

Frey flashed his brilliant white teeth. “Exactly. Much needs to be done. The Aesir and Vanir are scattered. Loki grows stronger. Even in his bonds, he has played us against each other, distracted us, made us lose focus. I am guilty of becoming distracted as well. For too long I have been removed from the world of men. Only your mother managed to...” He focused on the jar in my hands. “Well, after my big speech about not holding on to the past...” He smiled ruefully. “She was a vibrant soul. She would be proud of you.”

“Dad...” I wasn’t sure what else to say. Maybe I just wanted to try out the word again. I’d never had much experience using it. “I don’t know if I’m up to this.”

From the pocket of his flannel shirt, he pulled a tattered piece of paper—the MISSING flyer Annabeth and her dad had been distributing on the day I died. Frey handed it to me. “You will not be alone. For now, rest, my son. I promise it won’t be another sixteen years before we meet again. In the meantime, you should call your cousin. You should talk. You will need her help before all is said and done.”

That sounded ominous, but I didn’t get the chance to ask about it. I blinked and Frey was gone. I was sitting in the longship again, holding the flyer and the ceramic jar. Next to me sat Halfborn Gunderson, sipping from a cup of mead.

“Well.” He gave me a bloody grin. Most of his wounds had faded to scar tissue. “I owe you my life. How about I buy you dinner?”

I blinked and looked around us. Our ship had docked in Valhalla, on one of the rivers that ran through the lobby. How we’d gotten there, I had no idea. My other friends stood on the wharf, speaking with Helgi the hotel manager—grim faces all around as they regarded the off-loaded bodies of the three dead Valkyries.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

Halfborn drained his cup. “We’ve been summoned to the feast hall to explain ourselves before the thanes and the host of einherjar. I hope they let us eat before they kill us again. I’m starving.”



## Oh...So *That's* Who Fenris Smelled in Chapter Sixty-Three

WE MUST HAVE LOST an entire day returning to Valhalla, because dinner was under way in the Feast Hall of the Slain. Valkyries flew around with mead pitchers. Einherjar threw bread and roasted Saehrimnir at each other. Clusters of musicians jammed out all over the room.

The fiesta slowly quieted as our procession made its way toward the thanes' table. An honor guard of Valkyries carried the bodies of Gunilla, Irene, and Margaret, covered with white linen, on stretchers. I had hoped the fallen might come back to life when they reached Valhalla. Couldn't Valkyries become einherjar? But it didn't happen.

Mallory, X, T.J., and Halfborn followed the litters. Sam, Blitzen, Hearth, and I brought up the caboose.

Warriors glared at us as we passed. The Valkyries' expressions were even worse. I was surprised we weren't killed before we reached the thanes. I suppose the crowd wanted to see us publicly humiliated. They didn't know what we'd done. They just knew we were escaped rogues brought back for judgment, following the bodies of three Valkyries. We weren't shackled, but I still shuffled along as if the rope Andskoti was wrapped around my ankles. I cradled the ceramic jar in the crook of my arm. Whatever else happened, I couldn't lose that.

We stopped in front of the thanes' table. Erik, Helgi, Leif, and all the other Eriks looked grim. Even my old buddy Hunding the bellhop stared at me with shock and disappointment, as if I'd taken away his chocolate.

Helgi finally spoke. "Explain."

I saw no reason to hold anything back. I didn't speak loudly, but my words echoed through the hall. When I got to the fight with Fenris, my voice failed me. Sam picked up the story.

When she was done, the thanes sat silently. I couldn't read their mood. Perhaps they were more unsure now than angry, but it didn't matter. Despite my talk with my father, I didn't feel proud of what we'd accomplished. I was only alive because the three Valkyries in front of me had kept the fire giants at bay while we chained the wolf. No punishment from the thanes could make me feel worse than that.

Finally Helgi rose. "This is the most serious matter to come before this table in many years. If you speak truly, you have done deeds worthy of warriors. You have stopped Fenris Wolf from breaking free. You have sent Surt back to Muspellheim. But you acted as rogues—without the leave of the thanes, and in...questionable company." He glanced distastefully at Hearth, Blitz, and Sam. "Loyalty, Magnus Chase...loyalty to Valhalla is everything. The thanes must discuss all this in private before passing judgment, unless Odin wishes to intercede."

He glanced at the vacant wooden throne, which of course stayed empty. Perched on the backrest, the ravens fixed me with their glittering black eyes.

"Very well," Helgi sighed. "We—"

To my left, a booming voice said, "Odin wishes to intercede."

Nervous murmurs rippled through the feast hall. X raised his stone-gray face toward the thanes.

"X," T.J. whispered, "this is no time for jokes."

"Odin wishes to intercede," said the half-troll stubbornly.

His appearance changed. His huge trollish shape dropped away like camouflage fabric. In X's place stood a man who looked like a retired drill sergeant. He was barrel-chested, with massive arms stuffed in a short-sleeve Hotel Valhalla polo shirt. His gray hair was close-cropped, his beard cut square to accentuate his hardened weathered face. A black patch covered his left eye. His right eye was dark blue, the color of vein blood. At his side hung a sword so massive it made Jack the pendant tremble on his chain.

The man's name tag read: ODIN, ALL-FATHER, OWNER AND FOUNDER.

"Odin." Sam dropped to one knee.

The god smiled down at her. Then he gave me what I thought was a conspiratorial wink, though it was hard to tell, since he had only one eye.

His name rippled through the feast hall. The einherjar got to their feet. The thanes rose and bowed deeply.

Odin, formerly the half-troll known as X, marched around the table and took his place on the throne. The two ravens landed on his shoulders and pecked affectionately at his ears.

"Well!" Odin's voice boomed. "What does a god have to do to get a cup of mead around here?"



## We Are Subjected to the PowerPoint of Doom

ODIN GOT HIS DRINK, offered some toasts, then began pacing in front of his throne, talking about where he'd been and what he'd been doing the past few decades. I was too shocked to register much of Odin's speech. I think most of the einherjar felt the same way.

The room only began to unfreeze when Odin summoned up the glowing Valkyrie-Vision screens. Einherjar blinked and stirred as if coming out of mass hypnosis.

"I am a seeker of knowledge!" Odin announced. "This has always been true. I hung from the World Tree for nine days and nights, racked with pain, in order to discover the secret of runes. I stood in line in a blizzard for six days to discover the sorcery of the smartphone."

"What?" I muttered.

Blitzen coughed. "Just roll with it."

"And more recently," Odin announced, "I endured seven weeks of motivational speaker training at a hotel in Peoria to discover...this!"

A clicker appeared in his hand. On all the magical screens, a PowerPoint title slide glowed, with a whirling emblem that read: ODIN'S PLAN: HOW TO HAVE A HIGHLY SUCCESSFUL AFTERLIFE!

"What is going on?" I whispered to Sam.

“Odin is always trying different things,” she said. “Looking in new places for knowledge. He is very wise, but...”

Hearthstone signed as discreetly as possible: *This is why I work for Mimir.*

“So you see,” Odin continued, pacing back and forth, his ravens flapping their wings for balance, “everything these heroes have done, they did with my knowledge and my permission. I have been with them the entire time—either in person or in spirit.”

The screen changed. Odin started lecturing through some bullet points. My eyes kind of glazed over, but he talked about why he’d hidden in Valhalla as X the half-troll:

“To see how you would welcome such a warrior, and how you would carry out your duties when you didn’t think I was around. You all need to work on your positive empowerment and self-actualization.”

He explained why he’d chosen Samirah al-Abbas as a Valkyrie:

“If the daughter of Loki can show such bravery, why can’t we all? Samirah demonstrates the seven heroic qualities I’ll be highlighting in my upcoming book, *Seven Heroic Qualities*, which will be available in the Valhalla gift shop.”

He explained why the Norns’ prophecy didn’t mean what we thought it did:

“*Wrongly chosen, wrongly slain,*” he recited. “Magnus Chase was wrongly chosen by *Loki*—who thought this boy could be easily influenced. Instead, Magnus Chase proved himself a true hero!”

Despite the compliment, I liked Odin better as a taciturn half-troll than as a motivational speaker. The dinner crowd didn’t seem sure what to make of him either, though some of the thanes were dutifully taking notes.

“Which brings us to the *affirmations* portion of this presentation.” Odin advanced his slide show. A photograph of Blitzen popped up. It had obviously been taken during the crafting contest with Junior. Sweat streamed down Blitzen’s face. His expression was agonized, as if somebody had just dropped a hammer on his foot.

“Blitzen, son of Freya!” Odin said. “This noble dwarf won the rope Andskoti, which rebound Fenris Wolf. He followed his heart, mastered his fears, and served my old friend Mimir faithfully. For your heroism, Blitzen, you shall be released from Mimir’s service and given funding to open the shop you have always wanted. Because I have to say...” Odin waved his

hand over his hotel polo shirt. Suddenly he was wearing a chain mail vest. “I picked up your prototype after the contest, and it’s a very fine fashion statement. Any warrior would be wise to acquire one!”

The einherjar murmured in approval. Some oohed and ahhed.

Blitzen bowed deeply. “Thank you, Lord Odin. I am—I can’t begin to—Could I use that endorsement for my product line?”

Odin smiled benevolently. “Of course. And next we have Hearthstone the elf!”

Hearth’s photo appeared on the screens. He was slumped in the window of Geirrod’s palace. He had a silly grin on his face. His hands were making the sign for *washing machine*.

“This noble creature risked everything to rediscover rune magic. He is the first true sorcerer to appear from the mortal realms in centuries. Without him, the quest to restrain the Wolf would have failed many times over.” Odin beamed down at the elf. “My friend, you also shall be released from Mimir’s service. I will personally bring you to Asgard, where I will teach you the runes in a ninety-minute one-on-one free tutoring session, accompanied by a DVD and signed copy of my book *Rune Magic with the All-Father*.”

Polite clapping.

Hearthstone looked stunned. He managed to sign, *Thank you*.

The screen changed. In Sam’s photo, she was standing nervously at the counter of Fadlan’s Falafel, her face turned aside, blushing furiously as Amir leaned toward her, grinning.

“Ooooooo,” said the crowd of einherjar, followed by a fair amount of snickering.

“Kill me now,” Sam muttered. “Please.”

“Samirah al-Abbas!” Odin said. “I personally chose you to be a Valkyrie because of your courage, your resilience, your potential greatness. Many here mistrusted you, but you rose to the challenge. You followed my orders. You did your duty even when you were reviled and exiled. To you, I give a choice.”

Odin regarded the fallen Valkyries who lay before the thanes’ table. He allowed a respectful silence to fall across the room.

“Gunilla, Margaret, Irene—all knew the risks of being a Valkyrie. All gave their lives to make today’s victory possible. In the end, they saw your

true worth, and they fought at your side. I believe they would agree you should be reinstated as a Valkyrie.”

Sam’s knees almost gave out. She had to lean on Mallory Keen for support.

“I offer you a choice of jobs,” Odin continued. “I need a captain for my Valkyries. I can think of no one better than you. This would allow you more time to spend in the mortal world, perhaps a chance to rest after your harrowing quest. *Or*”—his blue eye gleamed—“you could choose a much more dangerous assignment, working directly for me as the need arises on other, shall we say, high-risk, high-reward missions.”

Sam bowed. “All-Father, you honor me. I could never replace Gunilla. All I ask for is the chance to prove myself, as many times as necessary, until no one here has any doubt of my loyalties to Valhalla. I will take the more dangerous assignment. Command me, and I will not fail.”

This went down pretty well with the crowd. The einherjar applauded. Some shouted approval. Even the other Valkyries regarded Sam with less hostile expressions.

“Very well,” Odin said. “Once again, Samirah, you prove your wisdom. We will speak later of your duties. And now...Magnus Chase.”

The screens changed. There I was: frozen mid-scream as I fell from the Longfellow Bridge. “Son of Frey, you retrieved the Sword of Summer. You kept it from the grip of Surt. You have proven yourself...well, perhaps not a great warrior—”

“Thanks,” I muttered.

“—but certainly a great einherji. I think we are in agreement—all of us here at the thanes’ table—that you, too, deserve a reward.”

Odin glanced to his left and right. The thanes stirred, hastily muttering, “Yes. Um. Absolutely.”

“I do not offer this lightly,” Odin said. “But if you still feel that Valhalla is not your place, I will send you to Folkvanger, where your aunt holds court. As a child of the Vanir, perhaps that would be more to your liking. *Or*”—his blue eye seemed to pierce right through me—“if you wish, I will even allow you to return to the mortal world, and be released from your duties as an einherji.”

The room filled with murmuring and tension. From the faces of the crowd, I could tell this was an unusual offer. Odin was taking a risk. If he

set a precedent of letting einherjar return to the world, wouldn't others want to go too?

I looked at Sam and Blitzen and Hearthstone. I looked at my hallmates from floor nineteen—T.J., Halfborn, Mallory. For the first time in years, I didn't feel homeless.

I bowed to Odin. "Thank you, All-Father. But wherever these friends of mine are—that's my home. I am one of the einherjar. I am one of your warriors. That is reward enough."

The whole dining hall erupted in cheering. Goblets banged on tables. Swords clattered against shields. My friends surrounded me, hugging me and clapping me on the shoulders. Mallory kissed my cheek and said, "You are a *huge* idiot." Then she whispered in my ear, "Thank you."

Halfborn ruffled my hair. "We'll make you a warrior yet, Frey-son."

When the cheering died down, Odin raised his hand. His clicker elongated into a glowing white spear.

"By Gungnir, the hallowed weapon of the All-Father, I declare that these seven heroes shall have full rights of passage through the Nine Worlds, including Valhalla. Wherever they go, they shall go in my name, serving the will of Asgard. Let no one interfere on pain of death!" He lowered his spear. "Tonight, we feast in their honor. Tomorrow, our fallen comrades shall be given to water and flame!"



## We Burn a Swan Boat, Which I'm Pretty Sure Is Illegal

THE FUNERAL was held on the pond in the Public Garden. Somehow, the einherjar had gotten possession of a swan boat—the kind that normally don't ply the waters during the winter. They'd modified the boat, turning it into a floating funeral pyre for the three Valkyries. The bodies were wrapped in white and laid on a bed of wood, with weapons and armor and gold heaped around them.

The pond was frozen over. There shouldn't have been any way to launch the boat, but the einherjar had brought along a friend—a fifteen-foot-tall giantess named Hyrokkin.

Despite the weather, Hyrokkin was dressed in cut-off shorts and an XXXXL T-shirt from the Boston Rowing Club. Before the ceremony, she stomped barefoot all over the pond, breaking the ice and scaring the ducks. Then she came back and waited respectfully at the shore, her shins glazed with freezing water, while einherjar came forward to say their good-byes to the fallen. Many left weapons, coins, or other keepsakes on the funeral pyres. Some spoke about how Gunilla, Margaret, or Irene had been responsible for bringing them to Valhalla.

Finally Helgi lit the fire. Hyrokkin pushed the boat into the pond.

There were no pedestrians in the Public Garden. Maybe magic kept them away. If any had been around, maybe some glamour would've kept them from seeing the crowd of undead warriors watching a ship burn.

My eyes drifted to the spot under the bridge where two weeks ago I'd been alive, homeless, and miserable. Only now could I admit how terrified I'd felt all the time.

The boat roared into a column of fire, obscuring the bodies of the Valkyries. Then the flames vanished as if somebody had turned off the gas, leaving no trace of the boat—just a steaming circle in the pond.

Mourners turned and drifted through the park, heading toward the Hotel Valhalla on Beacon Street.

T.J. gripped my shoulder. “You coming, Magnus?”

“In a bit.”

As my hallmates headed back home, I was happy to see Halfborn Gunderson slip his arm around Mallory Keen’s waist. She didn’t even cut his hand off for doing so.

Blitzen, Hearth, Sam, and I stayed behind, watching steam curl off the pond.

Finally Hearth signed: *I am going to Asgard. Thank you, Magnus.*

I’d seen the envious looks some of the einherjar had given him. For decades, maybe centuries, no mortal had been allowed to visit the city of the gods. Now Odin had agreed to teach an elf.

“That’s awesome, man,” I said. “But listen, don’t forget to come back and visit, huh? You’ve got a family now.”

Hearthstone smiled. He signed: *I hear you.*

“Oh, he’ll visit, all right,” Blitzen said. “He’s promised to help me move into my new store. I’m not lugging all those boxes without some magic assistance!”

I felt happy for Blitz, though it was hard to think about yet another one of my friends going away. “I’m sure you’ll have the best shop in Nidavellir.”

Blitzen snorted. “Nidavellir? Bah. Dwarves don’t deserve my fashion brilliance. That red gold from Odin will buy me a nice storefront on Newbury Street. *Blitzen’s Best* will be open in the spring, so you have absolutely no excuse not to come by and get fitted for one of these.” He brushed aside his overcoat, revealing a glittering, stylish bulletproof vest.

I couldn’t help it. I gave Blitzen a hug.

“All right, kid, all right.” He patted me on the back. “Let’s not wrinkle the fabric.”

Sam grinned. “Maybe you can make a new hijab for me. The old one got kind of ripped to shreds.”

“I’ll make it for you at cost, with more magical properties!” Blitzen promised. “And I have some ideas for colors.”

“You’re the expert,” Sam said. “As for me, I’ve got to get home. I’m grounded. I have a pile of make-up work from school.”

“And you have a boyfriend to deal with,” I said.

She blushed, which was kind of cute. “He’s not...All right, fine. Yes, I should probably deal with that, whatever that means.” She poked me in the chest. “Thanks to you, I can fly again. That’s the main thing. Try not to die too often until I see you again.”

“When will that be?”

“Soon,” Sam promised. “Odin wasn’t kidding about the high-risk assignments. The good news is”—she put a finger to her lips—“I can pick my own strike force. So all of you...consider yourselves warned.”

I wanted to hug her, to tell her how much I appreciated everything she’d done, but I knew Sam wouldn’t be comfortable with that. I settled for a smile. “Any time, al-Abbas. Now that Odin has given us permission to travel the worlds, maybe I can come visit you in Dorchester.”

“That,” she said, “is a truly mortifying idea. My grandparents would kill me. Amir would—”

“Okay, jeez,” I said. “Just remember: you’re not in this alone.”

“Noted.” She bumped me with her elbow. “And what about you, Magnus—back to Valhalla for the feast? Your hallmates have been singing your praises. I even heard a few Valkyries speculating that you might be made a thane one of these centuries.”

I smiled, but I wasn’t ready to think about *one of these centuries*. I gazed across the Public Garden. A taxi was just pulling up in front of the Cheers bar on the corner of Beacon and Brimmer. The ceramic jar weighed heavily inside my winter coat.

“First I have an appointment,” I said. “I have to keep a promise.”

I said good-bye to my friends. Then I went to meet my cousin.



## I Lose a Bet

“THIS IS WAY BETTER than the last memorial I attended,” Annabeth said. “Yours.”

We stood on a ridge in the Blue Hills, watching my mother’s ashes drift across the snowy trees. Far below, the sun glittered on Houghton’s Pond. The day was cold, but I didn’t feel uncomfortable. I felt warm and calm—more *right* than I’d felt in years.

I tucked the empty ceramic jar under my arm.

“Thanks for coming with me,” I said.

Annabeth’s gray eyes studied me, the same way she seemed to study everything—assessing not just my appearance, but my composition, my stress points, my potential for renovation. This was a girl, after all, who had made Parthenon models out of runestones when she was six years old.

“Glad to,” she said. “Your mom...from what I remember, she was great.”

“She would’ve liked the fact that you’re here.”

Annabeth gazed across the tree line. Her face looked sunburned from the wind. “They cremated you, too, you know. I mean that other body... whatever that was. Your ashes were placed in the family mausoleum. I didn’t even know we *had* a family mausoleum.”

I shuddered, imagining those ashes in a porcelain vase in a dank stone cubbyhole. Much better to be here, in the fresh air and the frigid sunlight.

“Pretending I was dead couldn’t have been easy for you,” I said.

She brushed a strand of hair from her face. “The service was harder on Randolph, I think. He seemed pretty shaken up, considering, you know...”

“That he never cared about me?”

“Or any of us. My dad, though...Magnus, that was difficult. He and I have had a rocky history, but I’m trying to be honest with him now. I don’t like hiding things.”

“Sorry.” I spread my hands. “I thought it was better if I didn’t drag you into my problems. For the last few days, I wasn’t sure if I was going to make it. Some...some dangerous things were happening. It had to do with my father’s, uh, side of the family.”

“Magnus, I might understand more than you think I do.”

I thought about that. Annabeth *did* seem more attuned, more grounded than most people I talked to—even most of the people in Valhalla. On the other hand, I didn’t want to put her at risk, or threaten the tenuous relationship we were starting to reconstruct.

“I’m okay now,” I assured her. “I’m staying with friends. It’s a good place, but it’s not the kind of arrangement most people would understand. Uncle Randolph can’t know about it. I’d appreciate it if you didn’t tell anyone, not even your dad.”

“Hmm,” she said. “I don’t suppose I get details?”

I thought about what Frey had told me: *You should talk. You will need her help before all is said and done.* I remembered what Sam had said about her own family—how they’d attracted the attention of the gods for generations. Randolph had hinted that our family was the same way.

“I just don’t want to put you in danger,” I said. “I kind of hoped you could be my one connection to the regular world.”

Annabeth stared at me. She snorted and began to laugh. “Wow. You have no idea how funny that is.” She took a deep breath. “Magnus, if you had any clue about how weird my life is—”

“Okay, but being here with you?” I said. “This is the most *normal* I’ve felt in years. After all the crazy fighting between our parents, the stupid grudges and years of not speaking to each other, I was hoping we could make our generation of the family not so messed up.”

Annabeth's expression turned serious. "*That* kind of normal I like." She extended her hand. "To us, the Chase cousins. Here's to being less messed up."

We shook on it.

"Now spill," she commanded. "Tell me what's been going on. I promise I won't tell. I might even be able to help. I also promise that whatever's been going on with you, my life is weirder. It'll make yours look downright suburban."

I considered everything I'd been through—death and resurrection, fishing for the World Serpent, fighting with giants, running from monster squirrels, binding a wolf on a disappearing island.

"How much you want to bet?" I said.

"Bring it on, cousin."

"Lunch?" I suggested. "I know a great falafel place."

"You've got a bet," she said. "Let's hear what you've been up to."

"Oh, no," I said. "Your story is so amazing? You go first."



RANDOLPH HADN'T SLEPT since his nephew's funeral service.

Every day he visited the mausoleum, hoping for some sign, some miracle. He cried real tears, but not for young Magnus. He wept for everything he'd lost—everything that might never be recovered now.

He came in the back door of the town house, his hands shaking so badly he could barely work the lock. He removed his snow boots and his heavy coat, then padded upstairs, going over what he'd said to Magnus on the bridge for the millionth time, wondering what he could have done differently.

He froze in the doorway of his office. A man in a priest's frock was sitting on his desk, dangling his feet.

"Visiting the gravesite again?" Loki grinned. "Honestly, I thought the service provided some excellent closure."

"You were the priest?" Randolph sighed. "Of course you were the priest."

Loki chuckled. "*A young life cut short, but let us celebrate his gifts and the impact he had upon us...* I was improvising, of course. But that's what I do best."

Randolph had seen the god of lies a dozen times before—when Loki had chosen to send his essence to Midgard—but it was always a shock—those brilliant eyes, the hair like flames, the ruined lips, and the scars across his nose. He was unnaturally handsome and unnaturally terrifying in equal measure.

"You've come to kill me, I expect." Randolph tried to remain calm, but his heartbeat still pulsed in his ears. "Why did you wait this long?"

Loki spread his hands magnanimously. “I didn’t want to be hasty. I needed to see how things played out. It’s true you failed. I could kill you, but you might still be useful. After all, I still have something you want.”

The god rose from the desk and opened his hand. Above his palm, flames flickered, consolidating into the miniature shapes of a woman and two girls. They writhed in the fire, reaching out to Randolph, silently pleading.

Only Randolph’s cane kept him from collapsing. “Please. I tried. I didn’t—I didn’t anticipate the dwarf and the elf. Or that cursed Valkyrie. You didn’t tell me—”

“Randolph, my dear friend...” Loki closed his hand, extinguishing the fire. “I hope you’re not making excuses?”

“No, but—”

“I’m the *master* of excuses. You’d have to try really hard to impress me. Just tell me, do you still want your family returned?”

“Of—of course.”

“Oh, good. How nice. Because I’m not done with you. Nor am I done with that little boy, Magnus.”

“But he has the sword. He stopped your plan.”

“He stopped *one facet* of my plan. Yes, it was very educational.” Loki stepped forward. He cupped his hand on Randolph’s cheek—an almost tender gesture. “I must say, your nephew is impressive. I don’t see the family resemblance at all.”

Randolph smelled the poison before he felt it. Acrid steam curled into his nostrils. The side of his face erupted in white-hot pain. He fell to his knees, his throat seizing up in shock. He tried to pull away, but Loki’s hand stayed stuck in place.

“There, there,” Loki said soothingly. “It’s just a little taste of my life—the snake venom that is splashed in *my* face every day. Perhaps you can understand why it makes me a tad grumpy.”

Randolph screamed until his throat was raw.

“I won’t kill you, old friend,” Loki said. “But I do punish failure. Absolutely!”

He took the hand away. Randolph crumpled, weeping, the smell of burned flesh in his nose.

“Why...” he croaked. “Why...?”

Loki raised his eyebrows in mock surprise. “Why what—torture you? Continue to use you? Fight against the gods? It is my nature, Randolph! Now, don’t fuss. I’m sure you’ll find a way to explain the horrible hand-shaped scar on your face. I think it lends you a certain...*gravitas*. The Vikings will be most impressed.”

Loki strolled to Randolph’s display cases. He ran his fingers along Randolph’s collection of trinkets and talismans. “Ragnarok has many triggers, my friend. The Sword of Summer is not the only weapon in play.”

He plucked a necklace from the display. His eyes gleamed as the small silver hammer pendant swung between his fingers.

“Oh, yes, Randolph.” Loki grinned. “You and I are going to have lots of fun.”



**AEGIR**—lord of the waves

**AESIR**—gods of war, close to humans

**ALF SEIDR**—elf magic

**ANDSKOTI**—the Adversary, the new, magic-infused rope binding Fenris Wolf

**BALDER**—god of light; the second son of Odin and Frigg, and twin brother of Hod. Frigg made all earthly things swear to never harm her son, but she forgot about mistletoe. Loki tricked Hod into killing Balder with a dart made of mistletoe.

**BIFROST**—the rainbow bridge leading from Asgard to Midgard

**DRAUGR**—Norse zombies

**EIKTHRYMIR**—a stag in the Tree of Laeradr whose horns spray water nonstop that feeds every river in every world

**EINHERJAR** (*EINHERJI*, sing.)—great heroes who have died with bravery on Earth; soldiers in Odin's eternal army; they train in Valhalla for Ragnarok, when the bravest of them will join Odin against Loki and the giants in the battle at the end of the world

**FENRIS WOLF**—an invulnerable wolf born of Loki's affair with a giantess; his mighty strength strikes fear even in the gods, who keep him tied to a rock on an island. He is destined to break free on the day of Ragnarok.

**FOLKVANGER**—the Vanir afterlife for slain heroes, ruled by the goddess Freya

**FREY**—the god of spring and summer; the sun, the rain, and the harvest; abundance and fertility, growth and vitality. Frey is the twin brother of

Freya and, like his sister, is associated with great beauty. He is lord of Alfheim.

FREYA—the goddess of love; twin sister of Frey; ruler of Folkvanger  
FRIGG—goddess of marriage and motherhood; Odin's wife and the queen of Asgard; mother of Balder and Hod

GINNUNGAGAP—the primordial void; a mist that obscures appearances

GLEIPNIR—a rope made by dwarves to keep Fenris Wolf in bondage

HEIDRUN—the goat in the Tree of Laeradr whose milk is brewed for the magical mead of Valhalla

HEIMDALL—god of vigilance and the guardian of Bifrost, the gateway to Asgard

HEL—goddess of the dishonorable dead; born of Loki's affair with a giantess

HELHEIM—the underworld, ruled by Hel and inhabited by those who died in wickedness, old age, or illness

HLIDSKJALF—the High Seat of Odin

HOD—Balder's blind brother

HONIR—an Aesir god who, along with Mimir, traded places with Vanir gods Frey and Njord at the end of the war between the Aesir and the Vanir

IDUN—she distributes the apples of immortality that keep the gods young and spry

JORMUNGAND—the World Serpent, born of Loki's affair with a giantess; his body is so long it wraps around the earth

JOTUN—giant

LOKI—god of mischief, magic, and artifice; the son of two giants; adept at magic and shape-shifting. He is alternately malicious and heroic to the Asgardian gods and to humankind. Because of his role in the death of Balder, Loki was chained by Odin to three giant boulders with a poisonous serpent coiled over his head. The venom of the snake occasionally irritates Loki's face, and his writhing is the cause of earthquakes.

LYNGVI—the Isle of Heather, where Fenris Wolf is bound; the island's location shifts every year as the branches of Yggdrasil sway in the winds of the void. It only surfaces during the first full moon of each year.

MAGNI AND MODI—Thor's favorite sons, fated to survive Ragnarok

**MIMIR**—an Aesir god who, along with Honir, traded places with Vanir gods Frey and Njord at the end of the war between the Aesir and the Vanir. When the Vanir didn't like his counsel, they cut off his head and sent it to Odin. Odin placed the head in a magical well, where the water brought it back to life, and Mimir soaked up all the knowledge of the World Tree.

**MJOLNIR**—Thor's hammer

**MUSPELL**—fire

**NAGLFAR**—the Ship of Nails

**NARVI**—one of Loki's sons, disemboweled by his brother Vali, who was turned into a wolf after Loki killed Balder

**NIDHOGG**—the dragon that lives at the bottom of the World Tree and chews on its roots

**NJORD**—god of ships, sailors, and fishermen; father of Frey and Freya

**NORNS**—three sisters who control the destinies of both gods and humans.

**NORUMBEGA**—a lost Norse settlement in their farthest point of exploration

**ODIN**—the “All-Father” and king of the gods; the god of war and death, but also poetry and wisdom. By trading one eye for a drink from the Well of Wisdom, Odin gained unparalleled knowledge. He has the ability to observe all the Nine Worlds from his throne in Asgard; in addition to his great hall, he also resides in Valhalla with the bravest of those slain in battle.

**RAGNAROK**—the Day of Doom or Judgment, when the bravest of the einherjar will join Odin against Loki and the giants in the battle at the end of the world

**RAN**—goddess of the sea; wife of Aegir

**RATATOSK**—an invulnerable squirrel that constantly runs up and down the World Tree carrying insults between the eagle that lives at the top and Nidhogg, the dragon that lives at the roots

**RED GOLD**—the currency of Asgard and Valhalla

**SAEHRIMNIR**—the magical beast of Valhalla; every day it is killed and cooked for dinner and every morning it is resurrected; it tastes like whatever the diner wants

**SESSRUMNIR**—the Hall of Many Seats, Freya's mansion in Folkvanger

**SKIRNIR**—a god; Frey's servant and messenger

**SLEIPNIR**—Odin's eight-legged steed; only Odin can summon him; one of Loki's children

SUMARBRANDER—the Sword of Summer

SURT—lord of Muspellheim

SVARTALF—dark elf, a subset of dwarves

THANE—a lord of Valhalla

THOR—god of thunder; son of Odin. Thunderstorms are the earthly effects of Thor's mighty chariot rides across the sky, and lightning is caused by hurling his great hammer, Mjolnir.

TREE OF LAERADR—a tree in the center of the Feast Hall of the Slain in Valhalla containing immortal animals that have particular jobs

TYR—god of courage, law, and trial by combat; he lost a hand to Fenris's bite when the Wolf was restrained by the gods

ULLER—the god of snowshoes and archery

UTGARD-LOKI—the most powerful sorcerer of Jotunheim; king of the mountain giants

VALA—a seer

VALHALLA—paradise for warriors in the service of Odin

VALI—Loki's son, who was turned into a wolf after Loki killed Balder; as a wolf he disemboweled his brother Narvi before he was gutted himself

VALKYRIE—Odin's handmaidens, who choose slain heroes to bring to Valhalla

VANIR—gods of nature; close to elves

YGGDRASIL—the World Tree

YMIR—the largest of the giants; father to both the giants and the gods. He was killed by Odin and his brothers, who used his flesh to create Midgard. This act was the genesis of the cosmic hatred between the gods and the giants.

## THE NINE WORLDS

ASGARD—the home of the Aesir

VANAHEIM—the home of the Vanir

ALFHEIM—the home of the light elves

MIDGARD—the home of humans

JOTUNHEIM—the home of the giants

NIDAVELLIR—the home of the dwarves

NIFLHEIM—the world of ice, fog, and mist

MUSPELLHEIM—the home of the fire giants and demons

HELHEIM—the home of Hel and the dishonorable dead

## RUNES (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

DAGAZ—new beginnings, transformations



THURISAZ—the rune of Thor



FEHU—the rune of Frey



RAIDHO—the wheel, the journey



PERTHRO—the empty cup



EHWAZ—horse, transportation



ALGIZ—shielding

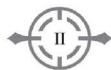


TIWAZ—the rune of Tyr



RICK RIORDAN

mAGNUS  
CHASE  
and the GODS of ASGARD



THE HAMMER OF THOR

Disney • HYPERION  
*Los Angeles New York*

*To J. R. R. Tolkien,  
who opened up the world of Norse mythology for me*



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26. We Nuke All the Fish
27. Let Me Go Immediately, or I Will Make You a Billionaire
28. And If You Order Now, You Also Get This Cursed Ring!
29. Nøkk, Nøkk
30. Somewhere Over the Rainbow, There's Some Messed-Up Stuff Going On
31. Heimdall Takes a Selfie with Literally Everyone
32. Godzilla Sends Me an Important Message
33. Falafel Break? Yes, Thank You
34. We Visit My Favorite Mausoleum
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36. Solving Problems with Extreme Fashion
37. Meat S'mores Roasting on an Open Fire
38. You Will Never, Ever Guess Blitzen's Password
39. Elvis Has Left the Bowling Bag
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## Could You Please Stop Killing My Goat?

**LESSON LEARNED:** If you take a Valkyrie out for coffee, you'll get stuck with the check and a dead body.

I hadn't seen Samirah al-Abbas in almost six weeks, so when she called out of the blue and said we needed to talk about a matter of life and death, I agreed right away.

(Technically I'm already dead, which means the whole *life-and-death* thing didn't apply, but still...Sam sounded anxious.)

She hadn't yet arrived when I got to the Thinking Cup on Newbury Street. The place was packed as usual, so I queued up for coffee. A few seconds later, Sam flew in—literally—right over the heads of the café patrons.

Nobody batted an eye. Regular mortals aren't good at processing magical stuff, which is fortunate, because otherwise Bostonians would spend most of their time running around in a panic from giants, trolls, ogres, and *einherjar* with battle-axes and lattes.

Sam landed next to me in her school uniform—white sneakers, khaki slacks, and a long-sleeve navy shirt with the King Academy logo. A green hijab covered her hair. An ax hung from her belt. I was pretty sure the ax wasn't standard dress code.

As glad as I was to see her, I noted that the skin under her eyes was darker than usual. She was swaying on her feet.

"Hey," I said. "You look terrible."

“Nice to see you, too, Magnus.”

“No, I mean...not terrible like *different than normal* terrible. Just terrible like exhausted.”

“Should I get you a shovel so you can dig that hole a little deeper?”

I raised my hands in surrender. “Where have you been the last month and a half?”

Her shoulders tightened. “My workload this semester has been killing me. I’m tutoring kids after school. Then, as you might remember, there’s my part-time job reaping souls of the dead and running top secret missions for Odin.”

“You kids today and your busy schedules.”

“On top of all that...there’s flight school.”

“Flight school?” We shuffled forward with the line. “Like *airplanes*?”

I knew Sam’s goal was to become a professional pilot someday, but I hadn’t realized she was already taking lessons. “You can *do* that at sixteen?”

Her eyes sparkled with excitement. “My grandparents could never have afforded it, but the Fadlans have this friend who runs a flight school. They finally convinced Jid and Bibi—”

“Ah.” I grinned. “So the lessons were a gift from Amir.”

Sam blushed. She’s the only teenager I know who has a *betrothed*, and it’s cute how flustered she gets when she talks about Amir Fadlan.

“Those lessons were the most thoughtful, the most considerate...” She sighed wistfully. “But enough of that. I didn’t bring you here to talk about my schedule. We have an informant to meet.”

“An informant?”

“This could be the break I’ve been waiting for. If his information is good  
—”

Sam’s phone buzzed. She fished it out of her pocket, checked the screen, and cursed. “I have to go.”

“You just got here.”

“Valkyrie business. Possible code three-eight-one: heroic death in progress.”

“You’re making that up.”

“I’m not.”

“So...what, somebody thinks they’re about to die and they text you ‘*Going down! Need Valkyrie ASAP!*’ followed by a bunch of sad-face emojis?”

“I seem to recall taking *your* soul to Valhalla. You didn’t text me.”

“No, but I’m special.”

“Just get a table outside,” she said. “Meet my informant. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“I don’t even know what your informant looks like.”

“You’ll recognize him when you see him,” Sam promised. “Be brave. Also, get me a scone.”

She flew out of the shop like Super Muslima, leaving me to pay for our order.

I got two large coffees and two scones and found a table outside.

Spring had arrived early in Boston. Patches of dirty snow still clung to the curbs like dental plaque, but the cherry trees popped with white and red buds. Flowery pastel clothing displays bloomed in the windows of high-end boutiques. Tourists strolled by enjoying the sunshine.

Sitting outside, comfortable in my freshly laundered jeans, T-shirt, and denim jacket, I realized this would be the first spring in three years that I hadn’t been homeless.

Last March, I had been scrounging from Dumpsters. I’d been sleeping under a bridge in the Public Garden, hanging out with my buddies Hearth and Blitz, avoiding the cops and just trying to stay alive.

Then, two months ago, I died fighting a fire giant. I’d woken up in the Hotel Valhalla as one of Odin’s *einherji* warriors.

Now I had clean clothes. I took a shower every day. I slept in a comfortable bed every night. I could sit at this café table, eating food I’d actually paid for, and not worry about when the staff would force me to move along.

Since my rebirth, I’d gotten used to a lot of weird stuff. I’d traveled the Nine Worlds meeting Norse gods, elves, dwarves, and a bunch of monsters with names I couldn’t pronounce. I’d scored a magical sword that presently hung around my neck in the form of a runestone pendant. I’d even had a mind-melting conversation with my cousin Annabeth about the *Greek* gods who hung out in New York and made *her* life difficult. Apparently North America was lousy with ancient gods. We had a full-blown infestation.

All of that I’d learned to accept.

But being back in Boston on a nice spring day, hanging out like a regular mortal kid?

That felt strange.

I scanned the crowd of pedestrians, looking for Sam's informant. *You'll recognize him when you see him*, she'd promised. I wondered what kind of information this guy had, and why Sam considered it life-and-death.

My gaze fixed on a storefront at the end of the block. Over the doorway, the brass-and-silver sign still gleamed proudly: BLITZEN'S BEST, but the shop was shuttered. The front door window was papered over on the inside, with a message hastily scrawled in red marker: *Closed for remodeling. Back soon!*

I'd been hoping to ask Samirah about that. I had no idea why my old friend Blitz had abruptly disappeared. One day a few weeks ago, I'd just walked by the shop and found it closed. Since then, there'd been no word from Blitzen or Hearthstone, which wasn't like them.

Thinking about this made me so preoccupied I almost didn't see our informant until he was right on top of me. But Sam was correct: he kind of stood out. It's not every day you see a goat in a trench coat.

A porkpie hat was wedged between his curly horns. A pair of sunglasses perched on his nose. His trench coat kept getting tangled in his back hooves.

Despite his clever disguise, I recognized him. I'd killed and eaten this particular goat on another world, which is the sort of bonding experience you don't forget.

"Otis," I said.

"*Shhh*," he said. "I'm incognito. Call me...Otis."

"I'm not sure that's how *incognito* works, but okay."

Otis, aka Otis, climbed into the chair I'd reserved for Sam. He sat on his back haunches and put his front hooves on the table. "Where is the Valkyrie? Is she incognito, too?" He peered at the nearest pastry bag as if Sam might be hiding inside.

"Samirah had to go reap a soul," I said. "She'll be back soon."

"It must be nice having a purpose in life." Otis sighed. "Well, thank you for the food."

"That's not for—"

Otis snapped up Sam's scone bag and began to eat it, paper and all.

At the table next to us, an older couple glanced at my goat friend and smiled. Maybe their mortal senses perceived him as a cute child or a funny pet dog.

"So." I had a hard time watching Otis devour the pastry, spraying crumbs across the lapels of his trench coat. "You had something to tell us?"

Otis belched. "It's about my master."

"Thor."

Otis flinched. "Yes, him."

If I worked for the thunder god, I too would have flinched when I heard Thor's name. Otis and his brother, Marvin, pulled the god's chariot. They also provided Thor with a never-ending supply of goat meat. Each night, Thor killed and ate them for dinner. Each morning, Thor resurrected them. This is why you should go to college, kids—so when you grow up you do not have to take a job as a magical goat.

"I finally have a lead," Otis said, "on that *certain object* my master is missing."

"You mean his ham—?"

"Don't say it aloud!" Otis warned. "But, yes...his *ham*."

I flashed back to January, when I'd first met the thunder god. Good times around the campfire, listening to Thor fart, talk about his favorite TV shows, fart, complain about his missing hammer, which he used to kill giants and stream his favorite TV shows, and fart.

"It's *still* missing?" I asked.

Otis clacked his front hooves on the tabletop. "Well, not *officially*, of course. If the giants knew for certain that Thor was without his you-know-what, they would invade the mortal worlds, destroy everything, and send me into a very deep funk. But unofficially...yes. We've been searching for months with no luck. Thor's enemies are getting bolder. They sense weakness. I told my therapist it reminds me of when I was a kid in the goat pen and the bullies were sizing me up." Otis got a faraway look in his yellow slit-pupil eyes. "I think that's when my traumatic stress started."

This was my cue to spend the next several hours talking to Otis about his feelings. Being a terrible person, I just said "I feel your pain" and moved on.

"Otis," I said, "the last time we saw you, we found Thor a nice iron staff to use as a backup weapon. He's not exactly defenseless."

"No, but the staff is not as good as the...*ham*. It doesn't inspire the same fear in the giants. Also, Thor gets cranky trying to watch his shows on the staff. The screen is tiny, and the resolution is terrible. I don't like it when Thor is cranky. It makes it hard for me to find my happy space."

A lot about this did not make sense: why Thor would have so much trouble locating his own hammer; how he could possibly have kept its loss a

secret from the giants for so long; and the idea that Otis the goat would have a happy space.

“So Thor wants our help,” I guessed.

“Not officially.”

“Of course not. We’ll all have to wear trench coats and glasses.”

“That’s an excellent idea,” Otis said. “Anyway, I told the Valkyrie I would keep her updated since she is in charge of Odin’s...you know, special missions. This is the first good lead I’ve gotten to the location of the *certain object*. My source is reliable. He’s another goat who goes to the same psychiatrist. He overheard some talk in his barnyard.”

“You want us to track down a lead based on barnyard gossip you heard in your psychiatrist’s waiting room.”

“That would be great.” Otis leaned so far forward I was afraid he might fall out of his chair. “But you’re going to have to be careful.”

It took all my effort not to laugh. I’d played catch-the-lava-ball with fire giants. I’d eagle-skied over the rooftops of Boston. I’d pulled the World Serpent out of Massachusetts Bay and defeated Fenris Wolf with a ball of yarn. Now this goat was telling me to be careful.

“So where is the *ham*?” I asked. “Jotunheim? Niflheim? Thorfarheim?”

“You’re teasing.” Otis’s sunglasses slipped sideways on his snout. “But the *ham* is in a different dangerous location. It’s in Provincetown.”

“Provincetown,” I repeated. “On the tip of Cape Cod.”

I had vague memories of the place. My mom had taken me there for a weekend one summer when I was about eight. I remembered beaches, saltwater taffy, lobster rolls, and a bunch of art galleries. The most dangerous thing we’d encountered was a seagull with irritable bowel syndrome.

Otis lowered his voice. “There is a barrow in Provincetown—a *wight’s* barrow.”

“Is that like a wheelbarrow?”

“No, no. A wight...” Otis shuddered. “Well, a wight is a powerful undead creature that likes to collect magical weapons. A wight’s tomb is called a—a *barrow*. Sorry, I have a hard time talking about wights. They remind me of my father.”

That raised another batch of questions about Otis’s childhood, but I decided to leave them for his therapist.

“Are there a lot of lairs of undead Vikings in Provincetown?” I asked.

“Only one, as far as I know. But that’s enough. If the *certain object* is there, it will be difficult to retrieve—underground, and guarded by powerful magic. You’ll need your friends—the dwarf and the elf.”

That would have been great, if I had any idea where those friends were. I hoped Sam knew more than I did.

“Why doesn’t Thor go and check this barrow himself?” I asked. “Wait... let me guess. He doesn’t want to draw attention. Or he wants us to have a chance to be heroes. Or it’s hard work and he has some shows to catch up on.”

“To be fair,” Otis said, “the new season of *Jessica Jones* did just start streaming.”

*It’s not the goat’s fault*, I told myself. *He does not deserve to be punched.*

“Fine,” I said. “When Sam gets here, we’ll talk strategy.”

“I’m not sure I should wait with you.” Otis licked a crumb off his lapel. “I should have mentioned this earlier, but you see, someone...or *something*...has been stalking me.”

The hairs on my neck tingled. “You think they followed you here?”

“I’m not sure,” Otis said. “Hopefully my disguise threw them off.”

*Oh, great*, I thought.

I scanned the street but saw no obvious lurkers. “Did you get a good look at this someone/something?”

“No,” Otis admitted. “But Thor has all sorts of enemies who would want to stop us from getting his—his *ham* back. They would not want me sharing information with you, especially this last part. You have to warn Samirah that—”

**THUNK.**

Living in Valhalla, I was used to deadly weapons flying out of nowhere, but I was still surprised when an ax sprouted from Otis’s furry chest.

I lunged across the table to help him. As the son of Frey, god of fertility and health, I can do some pretty awesome first aid magic given enough time. But as soon as I touched Otis, I sensed that it was too late. The ax had pierced his heart.

“Oh, dear.” Otis coughed blood. “I’ll just...die...now.”

His head lolled backward. His porkpie hat rolled across the pavement. The lady sitting behind us screamed as if just now noticing that Otis was not a cute puppy dog. He was, in fact, a dead goat.

I scanned the rooftops across the street. Judging from the angle of the ax, it must have been thrown from somewhere up there...yes. I caught a flicker of movement just as the attacker ducked out of sight—a figure in black wearing some sort of metal helmet.

So much for a leisurely cup of coffee. I yanked the magical pendant from my neck chain and raced after the goat-assassin.



## Your Standard Rooftop Chase Scene with Talking Swords and Ninjas

I SHOULD introduce my sword.

Jack, these are the peeps. Peeps, this is Jack.

His real name is *Sumarbrander*, the Sword of Summer, but Jack prefers *Jack* because reasons. When Jack feels like snoozing, which is most of the time, he hangs out on a chain around my neck in the form of a pendant marked with *fehu*, the rune of Frey:



When I need his help, he turns into a sword and kills things. Sometimes he does this while I wield him. Other times he does this while flying around on his own and singing annoying pop songs. He is magical that way.

As I bounded across Newbury Street, Jack sprang to full form in my hand. His blade—thirty inches of double-edged bone-forged steel—was emblazoned with runes that pulsed in different colors when Jack talked.

“What’s going on?” he asked. “Who are we killing?”

Jack claims he doesn’t pay attention to my conversations when he is in pendant form. He says he usually has his headphones on. I don’t believe this, because Jack doesn’t have headphones. Or ears.

“Chasing assassin,” I blurted out, dodging a taxi. “Killed goat.”

“Right,” Jack said. “Same old, same old, then.”

I leaped up the side of the Pearson Publishing building. I’d spent the last two months learning to use my einherji powers, so one jump took me to a ledge three stories above the main entrance—no problem, even with a sword in one hand. Then I hop-climbed from window ledge to cornice up the white marble facade, channeling my inner Hulk until I reached the top.

On the far side of the roof, a dark bipedal shape was just disappearing behind a row of chimneys. The goat-killer looked humanoid, which ruled out goat-on-goat homicide, but I’d seen enough of the Nine Worlds to know that humanoid didn’t mean human. He could be an elf, a dwarf, a small giant, or even an ax-murderer god. (Please, not an ax-murderer god.)

By the time I reached the chimneys, my quarry had jumped to the roof of the next building. That might not sound impressive, but the next building was a brownstone mansion about fifty feet away across a small parking lot. The goat-killer didn’t even have the decency to break his ankles on impact. He somersaulted on the tar and came up running. Then he leaped back across Newbury Street and landed on the steeple of the Church of the Covenant.

“I hate this guy,” I said.

“How do you know it’s a guy?” Jack asked.

The sword had a point. (Sorry, I keep stumbling into that pun.) The goat-killer’s loose black clothes and metal war helmet made it impossible to guess his or her gender, but I decided to keep thinking of him as male for now. Not sure why. I guess I found the idea of a bro goat-assassin more annoying.

I backed up, took a running start, and leaped toward the church.

I’d love to tell you I landed on the steeple, slapped some handcuffs on the killer, and announced, *You’re going away for livestock murder!*

Instead...well, the Church of the Covenant has these beautiful stained glass windows made by Tiffany in the 1890s. On the left side of the sanctuary, one window has a big crack at the top. My bad.

I hit the church’s slanted roof and slid back, grabbing the gutter with my right hand. Spikes of pain shot up my fingernails. I dangled from the ledge, my legs flailing, kicking the beautiful stained glass window right in the Baby Jesus.

On the bright side, swinging precariously from the roof saved my life. Just as I twisted, an ax hurtled from above, slicing the buttons off my denim jacket. A centimeter closer and it would’ve opened up my chest.

“Hey!” I yelled.

I tend to complain when people try to kill me. Sure, in Valhalla we einherjar are constantly killing each other, and we get resurrected in time for dinner. But outside Valhalla, I was very much killable. If I died in Boston, I would not be getting a cosmic do-over.

The goat-assassin peered down at me from the peak of the roof. Thank the gods, he appeared to be out of throwing axes. Unfortunately, he still had a sword at his side. His leggings and tunic were stitched from black fur. A soot-smeared chain mail coat hung loosely on his chest. His black iron helmet had a chain mail curtain around the base—what we in the Viking business call an *aventail*—completely covering his neck and throat. His features were obscured by a faceplate fashioned to resemble a snarling wolf.

Of course a wolf. Everybody in the Nine Worlds loves wolves. They have wolf shields, wolf helmets, wolf screen savers, wolf pajamas, and wolf-themed birthday parties.

Me, not so much loving the wolves.

“Take a hint, Magnus Chase.” The assassin’s voice warbled, modulating from soprano to baritone as if going through a special effects machine. “Stay away from Provincetown.”

The fingers of my left hand tightened on the hilt of my sword. “Jack, do your thing.”

“You sure about that?” Jack asked.

The assassin hissed. For some reason, people are often shocked when they find out my sword can talk.

“I mean,” Jack continued, “I know this guy killed Otis, but *everybody* kills Otis. Getting killed is part of Otis’s job description.”

“Just chop off his head or something!” I yelled.

The assassin, not being an idiot, turned and fled.

“Get him!” I told Jack.

“Why do *I* have to do all the hard work?” Jack complained.

“Because I’m dangling here and you can’t be killed!”

“Just because you’re right doesn’t make this cool.”

I flung him overhead. Jack spiraled out of view, flying after the goat-killer while singing his own version of “Shake It Off.” (I have never been able to convince him that the line isn’t *cheese graters gonna grate, grate, grate, grate, grate*.)

Even with my left hand free, it took me a few seconds to haul myself up to the roof. Somewhere to the north, the clanging of blades echoed off brick buildings. I raced in that direction, leaping over the church's turrets, launching myself across Berkeley Street. I bounced from rooftop to rooftop until I heard Jack yell in the distance, "OW!"

Most people might not run into battle to check on the welfare of their swords, but that's what I did. At the corner of Boylston, I scrambled up the side of a parking garage, got to the roof level, and found Jack fighting for his...well, maybe not his life, but at least his dignity.

Jack often bragged that he was the sharpest blade in the Nine Worlds. He could cut through anything and fight a dozen enemies at once. I tended to believe him, since I'd personally seen him take out giants the size of skyscrapers. Yet the goat-killer was having no trouble forcing him back across the roof. The assassin might have been small, but he was strong and quick. His dark iron sword sparked against Jack. Every time the two blades connected, Jack yelped, "Ow! Ow!"

I didn't know if Jack was in real danger, but I had to help. Since I didn't have another weapon and I didn't feel like fighting empty-handed, I ran to the nearest lamppost and ripped it out of the cement.

That sounds like I was showing off. Honestly, I wasn't. The pole was just the handiest weapon-like object I could find—except for a parked Lexus, and I wasn't quite strong enough to wield a luxury automobile.

I charged the goat-killer with my twenty-foot-long jousting light fixture. That got his attention. As he turned toward me, Jack lashed out, opening a deep cut in the assassin's thigh. The goat-killer grunted and stumbled.

That was my chance. I could have taken him down. Instead, when I was ten feet away, a distant howl cut through the air and froze me in my tracks.

*Jeez, Magnus, you're thinking, it was only a distant howl. What's the big deal?*

I may have mentioned I don't like wolves. When I was fourteen, two of them with glowing blue eyes killed my mother. My recent encounter with Fenris hadn't done anything to increase my appreciation for the species.

This particular howl was *definitely* that of a wolf. It came from somewhere across the Boston Common, reverberating off the high-rises, turning my blood to Freon. It was *exactly* the same sound I'd heard the night of my mother's death—hungry and triumphant, the baying of a monster that had found its prey.

The lamppost slipped from my grip, clanging against the asphalt.

Jack floated to my side. “Uh, *señor*...are we still fighting this guy or what?”

The assassin staggered backward. The black fur of his leggings glistened with blood. “And so it begins.” His voice sounded even more garbled. “Beware, Magnus. If you go to Provincetown, you will play into your enemy’s hands.”

I stared at that snarling face mask. I felt like I was fourteen again, alone in the alley behind my apartment the night my mother died. I remembered gazing up at the fire escape from which I had just dropped, hearing the wolves howl from our living room. Then flames exploded from the windows.

“Who—who are you?” I managed.

The assassin let out a guttural laugh. “Wrong question. The right question: Are you prepared to lose your friends? If not, you should leave Thor’s hammer lost.”

He backed to the edge of the roof and toppled over.

I ran to the ledge just as a flock of pigeons surged upward, rising in a blue-gray cloud, swirling away over the Back Bay’s forest of chimneys. Down below: no movement, no body, no sign of the assassin.

Jack hovered next to me. “I’ve could’ve taken him. You just caught me unprepared. I didn’t have time to do my stretches.”

“Swords don’t stretch,” I said.

“Oh, excuse me, Mr. Expert on Proper Warm-up Techniques!”

A tuft of pigeon down helicoperated to the ledge and stuck in a smear of the assassin’s blood. I picked up the tiny feather and watched red liquid soak into it.

“So what now?” Jack asked. “And what was that wolf howl?”

Ice water trickled down my eustachian tubes, leaving a cold, bitter taste in my mouth. “I don’t know,” I said. “Whatever it was, it’s stopped now.”

“Should we go check it out?”

“No! I mean...by the time we figured out where the sound came from, we’d be too late to do anything about it. Besides...”

I studied the bloody pigeon feather. I wondered how the goat-killer had disappeared so effectively, and what he knew about Thor’s missing hammer. His distorted voice reverberated in my mind: *Are you prepared to lose your friends?*

Something about the assassin had seemed very wrong...yet very familiar.  
“We have to get back to Sam.” I grabbed Jack’s hilt and exhaustion washed over me.

The downside of having a sword who fights on his own: whatever Jack did, I paid the price as soon as he returned to my hand. I felt bruises spreading across my arms—one for each time Jack had been struck by the other sword. My legs trembled like they’d been doing lunges all morning. A lump of emotion formed in my throat—Jack’s shame for letting the goat-killer fight him to a standstill.

“Hey, man,” I told him, “at least you cut him. That’s more than I did.”  
“Yeah, well...” Jack sounded embarrassed. I knew he didn’t like sharing the bad stuff with me. “Maybe you should rest for a minute, *señor*. You’re in no shape—”

“I’m all right,” I said. “Thanks, Jack. You did good.”  
I willed him to return to pendant form, then reattached the runestone to my neck chain.

Jack was right about one thing: I needed rest. I felt like crawling inside that nice Lexus and taking a nap, but if the goat-assassin decided to double back to the Thinking Cup, if he caught Sam unaware...

I took off across the rooftops, hoping I wasn’t too late.



## My Friends Protect Me by Telling Me Absolutely Nothing. Thanks, Friends

BACK AT the café, Sam was standing over Otis’s body.

Customers walked in and out of the Thinking Cup, making a wide arc around the dead goat. They didn’t seem alarmed. Maybe they saw Otis as a passed-out homeless guy. Some of my best friends were passed-out homeless guys. I knew how well they could repel a crowd.

Sam frowned at me. Under her left eye was a new orange bruise. “Why is our informant dead?”

“Long story,” I said. “Who hit you?”

“Also a long story.”

“Sam—”

She waved aside my concern. “I’m fine. Just please tell me you didn’t kill Otis because he ate my scone.”

“No. Now if he’d eaten *my* scone—”

“Ha, ha. What happened?”

I was still worried about Sam’s eye, but I did my best to explain about the goat-killer. Meanwhile, Otis’s form began to dissolve, melting into curls of white vapor like dry ice. Soon there was nothing left but the trench coat, the glasses, the porkpie hat, and the ax that had killed him.

Sam picked up the assassin’s weapon. The blade was no larger than a smartphone, but the edge looked sharp. The dark metal was etched with soot-black runes.

“Giant-forged iron,” Sam said. “Enchanted. Perfectly weighted. This is a valuable weapon to leave behind.”

“That’s nice. I’d hate for Otis to be killed with a shoddy weapon.”

Sam ignored me. She’d gotten pretty good at that. “You say the killer wore a wolf helm?”

“Which narrows it down to half the baddies in the Nine Worlds.” I gestured at Otis’s empty coat. “Where did his body go?”

“Otis? He’ll be fine. Magic creatures form from the mist of Ginnungagap. When they die, their bodies eventually dissolve back into that mist. Otis should re-form somewhere close to his master, hopefully in time for Thor to kill him again for dinner.”

That struck me as a strange thing to hope for, but not any stranger than the morning I’d just had. Before my knees could buckle, I sat. I sipped my now-cold coffee.

“The goat-killer knew the hammer is missing,” I said. “He told me if we went to Provincetown we’d be playing into our enemy’s hands. You don’t think he meant—”

“Loki?” Sam sat across from me. She tossed the ax on the table. “I’m sure he’s involved in this somehow. He always is.”

I couldn’t blame her for sounding bitter. Sam didn’t like talking about the god of deceit and trickery. Aside from the fact he was evil, he was also her dad.

“You heard from him recently?” I asked.

“Just a few dreams.” Sam rotated her coffee cup this way and that like the dial of a safe. “Whispers, warnings. He’s been mostly interested in... Never mind. Nothing.”

“That doesn’t sound like nothing.”

Sam’s gaze was intense and full of heat, like logs in a fireplace just before they ignite. “My dad is trying to wreck my personal life,” she said. “That’s nothing new. He wants to keep me distracted. My grandparents, Amir...” Her voice caught. “It’s nothing I can’t handle. It doesn’t have anything to do with our hammer problem.”

“You sure?”

Her expression told me to back off. In times past, if I pressed her too far, she would slam me against a wall and put her arm across my throat. The fact that she hadn’t yet choked me unconscious was a sign of our deepening friendship.

“Anyway,” Sam said, “Loki couldn’t be your goat-killer. He couldn’t wield an ax like that.”

“Why not? I mean, I know he’s technically chained up in Asgardian supermax for murder or whatever, but he doesn’t seem to have any problem showing up in my face whenever he feels like it.”

“My father can project his image or appear in a dream,” Sam said. “With extreme concentration, for a limited time, he can even send out enough of his power to take on a physical form.”

“Like when he dated your mom.”

Sam again demonstrated her affection for me by not clubbing my brains out. We were having a friendship fest here at the Thinking Cup.

“Yes,” she said. “He can get around his imprisonment in those ways, but he can’t manifest solidly enough to wield magic weapons. The gods made sure of that when they put a spell on his bindings. If he could pick up an enchanted blade, he could eventually free himself.”

I supposed that made sense in a nonsensical Norse-myth kind of way. I pictured Loki lying spread-eagled in some cave, his hands and feet tied with bonds made from—ugh, I could hardly think about it—the intestines of his own murdered sons. The gods had arranged that. They’d also supposedly set a snake over Loki’s head to drip venom in his face for all eternity. Asgardian justice wasn’t big on mercy.

“The goat-killer could still be working for Loki,” I said. “He could be a giant. He could be—”

“He could be anyone,” Sam said. “The way you describe him—how he fought and moved—he sounds like an einherji. Perhaps even a Valkyrie.”

My stomach dropped. I imagined it rolling across the pavement and coming to rest next to Otis’s porkpie hat. “Somebody from Valhalla. Why would anyone—?”

“I don’t know,” Sam said. “Whoever it is, he or she doesn’t want us following this lead on Thor’s hammer. But I don’t see that we have any choice. We need to act quickly.”

“Why the rush?” I asked. “The hammer’s been missing for months. The giants haven’t attacked yet.”

Something in Sam’s eyes reminded me of Ran the sea goddess’s nets, the way they swirled in the waves, stirring up drowned spirits. It wasn’t a happy memory.

“Magnus,” she said, “events are accelerating. My last few missions into Jotunheim...the giants are restless. They’ve summoned huge glamours to hide whatever it is they’re up to, but I’m pretty sure whole armies are on the move. They’re preparing to invade.”

“Invade...where?”

The breeze made her hijab flutter around her face. “*Here*, Magnus. And if they come to destroy Midgard...”

Despite the warm sunlight, a chill settled over me. Sam had explained how Boston sat at the nexus of Yggdrasil, the World Tree. It was the easiest place to pass between the Nine Worlds. I imagined the shadows of giants falling over Newbury Street, the ground shaking under iron-shod boots the size of panzer tanks.

“The only thing holding them back,” Sam said, “is their fear of Thor. That’s been true for centuries. They won’t launch a full-scale invasion unless they’re absolutely sure he is vulnerable. But they’re getting bolder. They’re starting to suspect the time might be right—”

“Thor’s only one god,” I said. “What about Odin? Or Tyr? Or my dad, Frey? Can’t *they* fight giants?”

As soon as I said it, the idea sounded ridiculous. Odin was unpredictable. When he showed up, he was more interested in giving motivational PowerPoint presentations than fighting. I’d never even met Tyr, the god of bravery and personal combat. As for Frey...my dad was the god of summer and fertility. If you wanted flowers to bloom, crops to grow, or a paper cut to heal, he was your guy. Scaring away the hordes of Jotunheim? Maybe not.

“We have to stop the invasion *before* it happens,” Sam said. “Which means finding the hammer Mjolnir. You’re sure Otis said Provincetown?”

“Yeah. A wight’s barrow. That’s bad?”

“On a scale of one to ten, it’s up there in the high twenties. We’ll need Hearthstone and Blitzen.”

Despite the circumstances, the possibility of seeing my old buddies lifted my spirits.

“You know where they are?”

Sam hesitated. “I know how to get in contact. They’ve been hiding in one of Mimir’s safe houses.”

I tried to process that. Mimir, the disembodied god’s head who traded drinks from the well of knowledge for years of servitude, who had ordered Blitz and Hearth to keep an eye on me while I was homeless because I was

“important to the fate of the worlds,” who ran an inter-world pachinko racket and other shady enterprises—Mimir had a collection of safe houses. I wondered what he was charging my friends for rent.

“Why are Blitz and Hearth in hiding?”

“I should let them explain,” Sam said. “They didn’t want to worry you.”

That was so *not* funny, I laughed. “They disappeared without a word because they didn’t want to worry me?”

“Look, Magnus, you needed time to train—to settle into Valhalla and get used to your einherji powers. Hearthstone and Blitzen just got a bad omen in the runes. They’ve been taking precautions, staying out of sight. For this quest, though—”

“A bad omen. Sam, the assassin said I should be prepared to lose my friends.”

“I know.” She picked up her coffee. Her fingers trembled. “We’ll be careful, Magnus. But for a wight’s tomb...rune magic and underground skills could make all the difference. We’ll *need* Hearth and Blitz. I’ll contact them this afternoon. Then, I promise, I’ll fill you in on everything.”

“There’s *more*?” Suddenly I felt like I’d been sitting at the Thanksgiving kiddie table for the past six weeks. I’d missed out on all the important conversations among the adults. I didn’t like the kiddie table.

“Sam, you don’t need to protect me,” I said. “I’m already dead. I’m a freaking warrior of Odin who lives in Valhalla. Let me help.”

“You will,” she promised. “But you *needed* training time, Magnus. When we went after the Sword of Summer, we got lucky. For what comes next... you’ll need all your skill.”

The current of fear in her voice made me shiver.

I hadn’t considered us *lucky* when we retrieved the Sword of Summer. We’d come close to dying multiple times. Three of our comrades had sacrificed their lives. We’d barely managed to stop Fenris Wolf and a host of fire giants from ravaging the Nine Worlds. If that was lucky, I did not want to see unlucky.

Sam reached across the table. She took my cranberry orange scone and nibbled off the edge. The icing was the same color as her bruised eye. “I should get back to school. I can’t miss another AP physics class. This afternoon I have some fires to put out at home.”

I remembered what she’d said about Loki trying to mess up her personal life, and that little hitch of doubt when she’d said Amir’s name. “Anything I

can help with? Maybe I can stop by Fadlan's Falafel and talk to Amir?"

"No!" Her cheeks flushed. "No, thank you. But definitely not. No."

"So that's a *no* then."

"Magnus, I know you mean well. There's a lot on my plate, but I can handle it. I'll see you tonight at the feast for the..." Her expression soured. "You know, the newcomer."

She meant the soul she had gone to reap. As the responsible Valkyrie, Sam would have to be there at the nightly feast to introduce the newest einherji.

I studied the bruise under her eye, and something dawned on me.

"This soul you picked up," I said, "this new einherji punched you?"

Sam scowled. "It's complicated."

I'd met some violent einherjar, but never one who would dare punch a Valkyrie. That was suicidal behavior, even for someone who was already dead. "What kind of idiot...Wait. Did this have anything to do with that wolf howl I heard from across the Common?"

Sam's dark brown eyes smoldered, right on the edge of combustion.

"You'll hear about it tonight." She rose and picked up the assassin's ax.

"Now go back to Valhalla. Tonight you'll have the pleasure of meeting..."

She paused, considering her words. "My brother."



## A Cheetah Runs Me Over

WHEN CHOOSING an afterlife, it's important to consider location.

Suburban afterlives, as in Folkvanger and Niflheim, may offer lower costs-of-not-living, but Valhalla's Midgard entrance is right in the heart of the city, on Beacon Street across from the Boston Common. You'll be within easy walking distance of the best shops and restaurants, and less than a minute from the Park Street T station!

Yes, Valhalla. For all your Viking paradise needs.

(Okay, sorry. I told the hotel management I'd put in a plug. But it *was* pretty easy getting back home.)

After buying a bag of chocolate-covered espresso beans at the coffee shop, I made my way through the Public Garden, passing my old camping spot under the footbridge. A couple of grizzled dudes sat in a nest of sleeping bags, sharing garbage-bin leftovers with a little rat terrier.

“Hey, guys.” I handed them Otis’s trench coat and hat, along with all the mortal money I had on me—about twenty-four bucks. “Have a good day.”

The guys were too startled to respond. I kept walking, feeling like I had an ax sticking out of my sternum.

Just because I’d been killed by a fire giant two months ago, I got to live in luxury. Meanwhile, these guys and their terrier ate from garbage bins. It wasn’t fair.

I wished I could round up every homeless person in Boston and say, *Hey, there's a big mansion right over here with thousands of comfy suites and free*

*food forever. Follow me!*

But that wouldn't work.

You couldn't bring mortals into Valhalla. You couldn't even die on purpose to get in. Your death had to be an unplanned selfless act, and you had to hope there was a Valkyrie around to see it.

Of course, that still made Valhalla better than the high-rise condos sprouting up all around downtown. Most of them were full of empty luxury apartments, too—shiny fourth or fifth homes for billionaires. You didn't need a brave death to get in, just a lot of money. If the giants *did* invade Boston, maybe I could convince them to do some strategic condo-stomping.

Finally, I reached the Midgard facade of the Hotel Valhalla. From the outside, it looked like an eight-story mansion of white-and-gray stone—just another piece of super-expensive real estate in a row of Colonial town houses. The only difference: the hotel's front garden was completely enclosed by a fifteen-foot-tall limestone wall with no entryway—the first of many defenses to keep non-einherjar from trespassing.

I jumped straight over and into the Grove of Glasir.

A couple of Valkyries hovered in the branches of the white birch tree, collecting its twenty-four-karat-gold foliage. They waved to me, but I didn't stop to chat. I marched up the front steps and pushed open the heavy double doors.

In the cathedral-size lobby, the usual scene was going on. In front of the roaring fireplace, teenage einherjar hung out playing board games or just chillaxing (which is like chilling, except with battle-axes). Other einherjar in fuzzy green hotel bathrobes chased each other around the rough-hewn pillars that lined the hall, playing hide-and-seek-and-kill. Their laughter echoed off the ceiling high above, where the rafters gleamed with the points of thousands of bundled spears.

I glanced over at the reception desk, wondering if Sam's mysterious eye-punching brother might be checking in. The only person there was the manager, Helgi, glowering at his computer screen. One sleeve of his green suit had been ripped off. Chunks of his epic-size beard had been pulled out. His hair looked even more like a dead buzzard than usual.

“Don't go over there,” warned a familiar voice.

Hunding the bellhop sidled up next to me, his warty red face covered with fresh scratches. His beard, like Helgi's, looked like it had recently been

caught in a chicken-plucking machine. “Boss is in a *foul* mood,” he said. “Like, beat-you-with-a-stick foul mood.”

“You don’t look so happy yourself,” I noted. “What happened?”

Hunding’s beard quivered with anger. “Our newest guest happened.”

“Samirah’s brother?”

“Hmph. If you want to call him that. I don’t know what Samirah was thinking, bringing that monster to Valhalla.”

“Monster?” I had a flashback to X, the half-troll Samirah had once admitted to Valhalla. She’d gotten flak for that, too, though X had later turned out to be Odin in disguise. (Long story.) “You mean this newcomer is an *actual* monster, like Fenris or—”

“Worse, if you ask me.” Hunding brushed a tuft of whiskers off his uniform name tag. “Cursed *argr* nearly tore my face off when he saw his accommodations. Not to mention the *complete* lack of a proper tip—”

“Bellhop!” the manager shouted from the reception desk. “Stop fraternizing and get over here! You have dragon teeth to floss!”

I looked at Hunding. “He makes you floss the dragons’ teeth?”

Hunding sighed. “Takes forever, too. I gotta go.”

“Hey, man.” I handed him the bag of chocolate-covered espresso beans I’d bought at the Thinking Cup. “Hang in there.”

The old Viking’s eyes turned misty. “Magnus Chase, you’re a fine lad. I could hug you to death—”

“BELLHOP!” Helgi shouted again.

“ALL RIGHT! HOLD YOUR EIGHT-LEGGED HORSES!” Hunding scurried toward the front desk, which spared me from a hug to the death.

As low as I felt, at least I didn’t have Hunding’s job. The poor guy had reached Valhalla only to be forced into servitude by Helgi, his archenemy from mortal life. I figured he deserved some chocolate now and then. Also, his friendship had already proven invaluable to me several times. Hunding knew his way around the hotel better than anybody, and he had all the juicy gossip.

I headed for the elevators, wondering what an “*argr*” was and why Sam would bring one into Valhalla. Mostly I wondered if I had time for lunch and a nap before this afternoon’s battle. It was important to be well fed and well rested when dying in combat.

In the corridors, a few einherjar gave me sidelong glances. Most ignored me. Sure, I’d retrieved the Sword of Summer and defeated Fenris Wolf, but

the majority of my fellow warriors just saw me as the kid who'd gotten three Valkyries killed and almost started Ragnarok. The fact that I was a son of Frey, the Vanir summer god, didn't help. His offspring weren't usually found in Valhalla. I wasn't cool enough to hang with the popular crowd—the children of war gods like Thor, Tyr, and Odin.

Yes, Valhalla had cliques just like high school. And while high school seemed to last for eternity, Valhalla actually did. The only einherjar who truly accepted me were my hallmates on floor nineteen, and I was anxious to get back to them.

In the elevator, the Viking easy-listening music did not help my mood. Questions swam around in my brain: Who had killed Otis? What had the goat wanted to warn me about? Who was Sam's brother? What were Blitz and Hearth hiding from? And who in their right mind would want to record "Fly Me to the Moon" in Old Norse?

The elevator doors opened at floor nineteen. I stepped out and promptly got sideswiped by a large animal. It was moving so fast I only registered a blur of tan and black before it turned a corner and was gone. Then I noticed holes in my sneakers where the animal had run over them. Tiny geysers of pain erupted from the tops of my feet.

"Ow," I said, belatedly.

"Stop that cheetah!" Thomas Jefferson, Jr. came charging down the corridor with his bayonet fixed, my other hallmates Mallory Keen and Halfborn Gunderson close behind him. They stumbled to a stop in front of me, all three panting and sweating.

"Did you see it?" T.J. demanded. "Where'd it go?"

"Um..." I pointed to the right. "Why do we have a cheetah?"

"It wasn't our idea, believe me." T.J. shouldered his rifle. As usual, he wore his blue Union Army uniform, his jacket unbuttoned over a green Hotel Valhalla T-shirt. "Our new hallmate isn't happy to be here."

"New hallmate," I said. "A cheetah. You mean...the soul Sam brought in. A child of Loki. He's a shape-shifter?"

"Among other things," said Halfborn Gunderson. Being a berserker, he had the physique of Sasquatch and wore only hide britches. Runic tattoos swirled across his massive chest. He banged his battle-ax on the floor. "I almost got my face smashed in by that *meinfretr*!"

Since moving to Valhalla, I'd learned an impressive number of Old Norse cusswords. *Meinfretr* translated as something like *stinkfart*, which

was, naturally, the worst kind of fart.

Mallory sheathed her two knives. “Halfborn, your face could use an occasional smashing.” Her brogue got thicker whenever she was angry. With her red hair and flushed cheeks, she could have passed for a small fire giant, except fire giants were not as intimidating. “I’m more concerned about that demon destroying the hotel! Did you see what he did to X’s room?”

“He took over X’s old room?” I asked.

“And proceeded to tear it up.” Mallory made a V with her fingers and flicked them under her chin in the direction the cheetah had fled. Miss Keen was Irish, so her V did not mean *peace* or *victory*—it meant something much ruder. “We came by to welcome him, found the place in ruins. No respect!”

I remembered my own first day in Valhalla. I had thrown a sofa across the living room and put my fist through the bathroom wall. “Well...adjusting can be tough.”

T.J. shook his head. “Not like this. The kid tried to kill us on sight. Some of the stuff he said—”

“First-rate insults,” Halfborn conceded. “I’ll give him credit for that. But I’ve never seen one person do so much damage....Come have a look, Magnus. See for yourself.”

They led me down to X’s old room. I’d never been inside, but now the door was wide open. The interior looked like it had been redecorated by a Category 5 hurricane.

“Holy Frigg.” I stepped over a pile of busted furniture into the foyer.

The layout was a lot like my own suite—four square sections jutting out from a central atrium like a giant plus sign. The foyer had once been a sitting area with a sofa, bookshelves, a TV, and a fireplace. Now it was a disaster zone. Only the fireplace was still intact, and gouge marks scarred the mantel as if our new neighbor had taken a broadsword to it.

From what I could see, the bedroom, kitchen, and bathroom wings had been similarly destroyed. In a daze, I moved toward the atrium.

Just like mine, it had a huge tree in the middle. The lowest branches spread across the apartment’s ceiling, interweaving with the rafters. The upper branches stretched into a cloudless blue sky. My feet sank into green grass. The breeze from above smelled like mountain laurel—a sort of grape Kool-Aid scent. I’d been in several of my friends’ rooms, but none of them had an open-air atrium.

“Was it like this for X?” I asked.

Mallory snorted. “Hardly. X’s atrium was a big pool—a natural hot spring. His place was always as hot, humid, and sulfurous as a troll’s armpit.”

“I miss X.” Halfborn sighed. “But, yes, all this is completely new. Each suite arranges itself to fit its owner’s style.”

I wondered what it meant that my atrium was exactly like the newcomer’s. I didn’t want to share styles with a murderous wildcat son of Loki who ran over people’s feet.

At the edge of the atrium lay another pile of wreckage. Freestanding shelves had been overturned. The grass was littered with ceramic bowls and cups—some colorfully glazed, others unfired clay.

I knelt and picked up the base of a broken flowerpot. “You think Cheetah Boy made all these?”

“Yep.” T.J. gestured with his bayonet. “There are a kiln and a potter’s wheel in the kitchen, too.”

“Good quality stuff,” Halfborn said. “The vase he threw at my face was beautiful and deadly. Just like Miss Keen, here.”

Mallory’s face went from strawberry red to habanero orange. “You’re an idiot.” Which was her way of expressing affection for her boyfriend.

I turned over the shard. On the base, the initials A.F. were etched in the clay. I did not want to speculate what they might stand for. Under the initials was a decorative stamp: two snakes curled in an elaborate S pattern, their tails looped around each other’s heads.



My fingertips felt numb. I dropped the shard and picked up another broken pot: same initials on the bottom, same serpentine stamp.

“It’s a symbol of Loki,” Halfborn offered. “Flexibility, change, slipperiness.”

My ears buzzed. I’d seen this symbol before...recently, in my own room. “How—how do you know?”

Halfborn puffed out his already puffed-out chest. “As I’ve told you, I’ve spent my time well in Valhalla. I have a PhD in Germanic literature.”

“Which he only mentions several times a day,” Mallory added.

“Hey, guys,” T.J. called from the bedroom. He speared his bayonet into a pile of clothing and held up a dark green sleeveless silk dress.

“Posh,” Mallory said. “That’s a Stella McCartney.”

Halfborn frowned. “How can you be sure?”

“I’ve spent my time well in Valhalla.” Mallory did a decent imitation of Halfborn’s gruff voice. “I have a PhD in fashion.”

“Oh, shut up, woman,” Halfborn muttered.

“And look at this.” T.J. held up a tuxedo jacket, also dark green, with pink lapels.

I’ll admit my brain was fuzzy. All I could think about was the symbol of Loki on the pottery, and where I’d seen the snake design before. The whirlwind of clothes in this room didn’t make sense to me—jeans, skirts, jackets, ties, and party gowns, most in shades of pink and green.

“How many people live here?” I asked. “Does he have a sister?”

Halfborn snorted. “T.J., should you explain, or should I?”

*FLOOOOOOM.* The sound of a ram’s horn echoed down the corridor.

“Lunchtime,” T.J. announced. “We can talk then.”

My friends headed for the door. I remained crouched over the pile of pottery shards, staring at the initials A.F. and the entwined serpents.

“Magnus?” T.J. called. “You coming?”

My appetite was gone. So was any desire to take a nap. Adrenaline screamed through my system like a high note on an electric guitar.

“You guys go ahead.” My fingers curled around the broken pot with the symbol of Loki. “There’s something I need to check first.”



## My Sword Has a Better Social Life Than I Do

IT'S A GOOD THING I didn't go to lunch.

The buffet was usually fought to the death, and as distracted as I felt, I would've gotten impaled by a fondue fork before I filled my plate.

Most activities in Valhalla were done to the death: Scrabble, whitewater rafting, pancake eating, croquet. (Tip: Don't ever play Viking croquet.)

I got to my room and took a few deep breaths. I half expected the place to be as trashed as A.F.'s room—like maybe the suites were so similar, mine would decide to mess itself up in solidarity. Instead, it was just the way I'd left it, only cleaner.

I'd never seen the housekeeping staff. Somehow, they always managed to tidy up when I was gone. They made the bed whether I'd slept in it or not. They scrubbed the bathroom even if I'd just done that myself. They pressed and folded my laundry, though I was careful never to leave my clothes lying around. Seriously, who irons and starches underwear?

I felt guilty enough having this huge suite to myself; the idea of housekeepers picking up after me only made it worse. My mom had raised me to take care of my own messes. Still, as much as I tried to do that here, the hotel staff swooped in daily and sanitized everything without mercy.

The other thing they did was leave me presents. That bothered me more than the starched underwear.

I made my way over to the fireplace. When I first checked in, there had been only one photo on the mantel—a shot of my mom and me when I was

eight, standing at the summit of Mount Washington. Since then, more pictures had appeared—some that I remembered from childhood, some that I had never seen before. I didn’t know where the hotel staff found them. Maybe as the suite became more attuned to me, the photos just emerged from the cosmos. Maybe Valhalla kept a backup copy of every einherji’s life on the iCloud.

In one shot, my cousin Annabeth stood on a hill, the Golden Gate Bridge and San Francisco in the background. Her blond hair blew sideways. Her gray eyes gleamed as if somebody had just told her a joke.

Looking at her made me happy because she was family. It also made me anxious because it was a constant reminder of our last conversation.

According to Annabeth, our family, the Chases, had some sort of special appeal to the ancient gods. Maybe it was our winning personalities. Maybe it was our brand of shampoo. Annabeth’s mom, the Greek goddess Athena, had fallen in love with her dad, Frederick. My dad, Frey, had fallen in love with my mother, Natalie. If somebody came up to me tomorrow and told me —surprise!—the Aztec gods were alive and well in Houston and my second cousin was the granddaughter of Quetzalcoatl, I would totally believe them. Then I would run screaming off a cliff into Ginnungagap.

The way Annabeth figured it, all the old myths were true. They fed off human memory and belief—dozens of musty pantheons still muscling up against one another like they did in the old days. As long as their stories survived, the gods survived. And stories were almost impossible to kill.

Annabeth had promised we would talk about it further. So far, we hadn’t had the chance. Before she returned to Manhattan, she’d warned me that she rarely used a cell phone because they were dangerous for demigods (though I had never noticed any problems). I tried not to worry that she’d been totally silent since January. Still, I wondered what might be going on down there in Greek and Roman land.

My hand drifted across the mantel to the next photo.

This one was harder to look at. My mother and her two brothers, all in their twenties, sat together on the steps of the family brownstone. Mom looked just as I always remembered her—pixie haircut, infectious smile, freckles, tattered jeans, and flannel shirt. If you could’ve hooked up a generator to her joy of life, you could’ve powered the entire city of Boston.

Sitting next to her was my Uncle Frederick, Annabeth’s father. He wore a too-big cardigan over an oxford shirt, and beige slacks riding halfway up

his calves. He held a model World War I biplane in one hand and grinned like a huge dork.

On the top step behind them, with his hands planted on his siblings' shoulders, sat their big brother, Randolph. He looked about twenty-five, though he was one of those people who was born to be old. His close-cropped hair was so blond it passed for gray. His large round face and burly frame made him resemble a club bouncer more than an Ivy League grad student. Despite the smile, his eyes were piercing, his posture guarded. He looked as if any second he would charge the photographer, take the camera, and stomp on it.

My mom had told me over and over: *Don't go to Randolph. Don't trust him.* She'd shunned him for years, refused to take me to the family mansion in Back Bay.

When I'd turned sixteen, Randolph had found me anyway. He'd told me about my godly father. He'd guided me to the Sword of Summer and promptly gotten me killed.

That made me a little wary of seeing good old Uncle Randolph again, though Annabeth thought we should give him the benefit of a doubt.

*He's family, Magnus,* she told me before she left for New York. *We can't give up on family.*

Part of me supposed she was right. Part of me thought Randolph was a dangerous piece of work. I didn't trust him farther than I could throw him, and even with einherji strength, I couldn't throw him very far.

*Gee, Magnus,* you might be thinking, *that's really harsh of you. He's your uncle. Just because your mom hated him, he ignored you most of your life, and then he got you killed, you don't trust him?*

Yeah, I know. I was being unreasonable.

The thing is, what bothered me most about Uncle Randolph wasn't our past. It was the way the photo of the three siblings had changed since last week. At some point, I don't get how, a new mark had appeared on Randolph's cheek—a symbol as faint as a water stain. And now I knew what it meant.

I held up the pot I'd taken from A.F.'s room—the initials etched in clay, the stamp with the two entwined snakes. Definitely the same design.

Somebody had branded my uncle's face with the mark of Loki.

I stared at the snake mark for a long time, trying to make sense of it.

I wished I could talk to Hearthstone, my expert on runes and symbols. Or Blitzen, who knew about magic items. I wished Sam were here, because if I was going crazy and seeing things, she would be the first to slap some sense into me.

Since I didn't have any of them to talk to, I pulled out my pendant and summoned Jack.

"Hey, *señor!*" Jack somersaulted through the air, his runes glowing blue and red. Nothing like a little disco lighting when you want to have a serious conversation. "Glad you woke me up. I have a date this afternoon with a *hot* spear, and if I missed that...Oh, man, I would stab myself."

"Jack," I said, "I'd rather not hear about your dates with other magical weapons."

"C'mon. You need to get out more! If you want to be my wingman, I could totally set you up. This spear has a friend—"

"Jack."

"Fine." He sighed, which caused his blade to glow a lovely shade of indigo. No doubt the lady spears found that very attractive. "So what's up? No more ninjas to fight, I hope?"

I showed him the serpent mark on the piece of pottery. "You know anything about this symbol?"

Jack floated closer. "Yeah, sure. That's one of Loki's marks. I don't have a PhD in Germanic literature or anything, but I think it represents, you know, snakiness."

I started to wonder if summoning Jack had been a good idea. "So our new neighbor across the hall makes pottery. And every pot has this on the bottom."

"Huh. I would guess he's a son of Loki."

"I know that. But why would he brag about it? Sam doesn't even like to mention her dad. This guy stamps Loki's symbol on all his work."

"No accounting for taste," Jack said. "Once I met a throwing dagger with a green acrylic grip. Can you imagine?"

I picked up the photo of the three Chase siblings. "But sometime during the last week, that same Loki symbol appeared on my uncle's face. Any thoughts?"

Jack planted the tip of his blade in the living room carpet. He bent forward until his hilt was an inch from the photo. Maybe he was getting nearsighted. (Near-hilted?)

“Hmm,” he said. “You want my opinion?”

“Yeah.”

“I think that’s pretty strange.”

I waited for more. Jack did not elaborate.

“Okay, then,” I said. “You don’t think maybe there’s a connection between...I don’t know, another child of Loki showing up in Valhalla, and this weird mark on Randolph’s face, and the fact that suddenly, after a couple of months of quiet, we have to find Thor’s hammer right away to avoid some invasion?”

“When you put it like that,” Jack said, “you’re right, it’s *very* strange. But Loki is always showing up in weird places. And Thor’s hammer...” Jack vibrated in place like he was either shuddering or suppressing a laugh. “Mjolnir is *always* getting misplaced. I swear, Thor needs to have that hammer duct-taped to his face.”

I doubted I would be getting that image out of my head anytime soon. “How can Thor lose it so easily? How could anyone steal it? I thought Mjolnir was so heavy nobody else could pick it up.”

“Common misconception,” Jack said. “Forget all that only-the-worthy-can-lift-it stuff from the movies. The hammer is heavy, but you get enough giants together? Sure, they can lift it. Now *wielding* it—throwing it correctly, catching it again, summoning lightning with it—that takes some skill. But I’ve lost count of the number of times Thor has fallen asleep in some forest, prankster giants have rolled up in a backhoe loader, and the next thing you know, the thunder god is hammerless. Most of the time he gets it back quickly, kills the pranksters, and lives happily ever after.”

“But not this time.”

Jack wobbled back and forth, his version of a shrug. “I suppose getting Mjolnir back is important. The hammer *is* powerful. Inspires fear in the giants. Smashes entire armies. Keeps the forces of evil from destroying the universe and whatever. Personally, I’ve always found him kind of a bore. He just *sits* there most of the time. Doesn’t say a word. And don’t ever invite him to karaoke night at the Nuclear Rainbow. *Disaster*. I completely had to carry both parts on ‘Love Never Felt So Good.’”

I wondered if Jack’s blade was sharp enough to cut off the too-much information he was giving me. I guessed not.

“Last question,” I said. “Halfborn mentioned that this new child of Loki was an ‘argr.’ You have any idea—”

“I LOVE argrs!” Jack somersaulted with glee, nearly slicing off my nose.  
“Frey’s Fripperies! We have an argr across the hall? That’s great news.”

“Um, so—”

“One time we were in Midgard—me and Frey and a couple of elves, right? It was like three in the morning, and this argr walked up to us...” Jack howled with laughter, his runes pulsing in full *Saturday Night Fever* mode.  
“Oh, wow. That was an *epic* night!”

“But what exactly—?”

Someone knocked on my door. T.J. poked his head in. “Magnus, sorry to bother—Oh, hey, Jack, what’s up?”

“T.J.!” Jack said. “You recover from last night?”

T.J. chuckled, though he looked embarrassed. “Just about.”

I frowned. “You guys went partying last night?”

“Oh, *señor, señor*,” Jack chided, “you *really* need to come out with us. You haven’t lived until you’ve gone clubbing with a Civil War bayonet.”

T.J. cleared his throat. “So, anyway, I came to get you, Magnus. The battle’s about to start.”

I looked around for a clock, then remembered I didn’t have one. “Isn’t it early?”

“It’s Thursday,” T.J. reminded me.

I cursed. Thursdays were special. And complicated. I hated them. “Let me grab my gear.”

“Also,” T.J. said, “the hotel ravens have tracked down our new hallmate. I thought we should probably go be with him. They’re bringing him to the battle...whether he wants to be there or not.”



## Love Me Some Weasel Soup

THURSDAY MEANT dragons. Which meant an even more painful death than usual.

I would've brought Jack, but 1) he thought practice battles were beneath him, and 2) he had a hot date with a polearm.

By the time T.J. and I arrived at the battlefield, the fighting had already started. Armies streamed into the hotel's interior courtyard—a topographical killing zone big enough to be its own sovereign country, with woods, meadows, rivers, hills, and mock villages. On all four sides, soaring into the hazy white fluorescent sky, tiers of gold-rimmed balconies overlooked the field. From the upper levels, catapults hurled fiery projectiles toward the warriors below like deadly ticker tape.

The blare of horns echoed through the forests. Plumes of smoke rose from burning huts. Einherjar charged into the river, fighting on horseback, laughing as they cut each other down.

And, because it was Thursday, a dozen large dragons had also joined the slaughter.

The older einherjar called them *lindworms*. If you ask me, that made them sound like a mildly annoying skin rash. Instead, lindworms were the size and length of eighteen-wheelers. They had just two front legs, with leathery brown bat-type wings too small for effective flight. Mostly they dragged themselves across the ground, occasionally flapping, leaping, and swooping down on their prey.

From a distance, with their brown, green, and ocher hides, they looked like an angry flock of giant carnivorous turkey snakes. But trust me: up close, they were bad news.

Our goal for Thursday's battle? Stay alive as long as possible while the dragons tried very hard not to let us. (Spoiler: The dragons always won.)

Mallory and Halfborn waited for us at the edge of the field. Halfborn was adjusting the straps on Mallory's armor.

"You're doing it wrong," she growled. "That's too tight across the shoulders."

"Woman, I've been putting on armor for centuries."

"When? You always go into battle bare-chested."

"Are you complaining about that?" Halfborn asked.

Mallory blushed. "Shut up."

"Ah, look, here's Magnus and T.J.!" Halfborn clapped me on the shoulder, dislocating several of my joints. "Floor nineteen is accounted for!"

Technically, that wasn't true. Floor nineteen had almost a hundred residents. But our particular corridor—our neighborhood within the neighborhood—consisted of us four. Plus, of course, the newest resident...

"Where's the cheetah?" T.J. asked.

As if on cue, a raven dive-bombed us. It dropped a burlap bag at my feet then landed nearby, flapping its wings and croaking angrily. The burlap bag moved. A long skinny animal squirmed out of it—a brown-and-white weasel.

The weasel hissed. The raven cawed. I didn't speak raven, but I was pretty sure it was telling the weasel, *Behave yourself or I will peck your weaselly eyes out.*

T.J. pointed his rifle at the animal. "You know, when the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts was marching toward Darien, Georgia, we used to shoot weasels and cook them in a soup. Tasty stuff. You guys think I should get out my old recipe?"

The weasel transformed. I'd heard so much about this new recruit being a monster that I half expected him to turn into a living corpse like the goddess Hel, or a miniature version of the sea serpent Jormungand. Instead, the animal grew into a regular human teen, long and lanky, with a swirl of dyed green hair, black at the roots, like a plug of weeds pulled out of a lawn.

The weasel's brown-and-white fur changed into green and pink clothes: battered rose high-tops, skinny lime green corduroy pants, a pink-and-green

argyle sweater-vest over a white tee, and another pink cashmere sweater wrapped around the waist like a kilt. The outfit reminded me of a jester's motley, or the coloration of a venomous animal warning the whole world: *Try me and you die.*

The newcomer looked up, and I forgot how to breathe. It was Loki's face, except younger—the same wry smile and sharp features, the same unearthly beauty, but without the scarred lips or the acid burns across the nose. And those eyes—one dark brown, the other pale amber. I'd forgotten the term for that, having different-colored irises. My mom would've called it David Bowie eyes. I called it completely unnerving.

The weirdest thing of all? I was pretty sure I had seen this kid before.

Yeah, I know. You're thinking a kid like that would stand out. How could I not remember exactly where we'd crossed paths? But when you live on the streets, wild-looking people are normal. Only normal people stand out as strange.

The kid flashed a perfect white smile at T.J., though there was no warmth in those eyes. "Point that rifle somewhere else, or I will wrap it around your neck like a bow tie."

Something told me this was not an idle threat. The kid might actually know how to tie a bow tie, which was kinda scary arcane knowledge.

T.J. laughed. He also lowered his rifle. "We didn't get a chance to introduce ourselves earlier, when you were trying to kill us. I'm Thomas Jefferson, Jr. This is Mallory Keen, Halfborn Gunderson, and Magnus Chase."

The newcomer just stared at us. Finally the raven made an irritated squawk.

"Yeah, yeah," the kid told the bird. "Like I said, I'm calmer now. You didn't mess me up, so it's all cool."

*Screeeak!*

The kid sighed. "Fine, I'll introduce myself. I'm Alex Fierro. Pleased to meet you all, I guess. Mr. Raven, you can go now. I promise not to kill them unless I have to."

The raven ruffled his feathers. He gave me the stink eye, like, *It's your problem now, buddy.* Then he flew away.

Halfborn grinned. "Well, that's settled! Now that you've promised not to kill us, let's start killing other people!"

Mallory crossed her arms. "He doesn't even have a weapon."

“She,” Alex corrected.

“What?” Mallory asked.

“Call me *she*—unless and until I tell you otherwise.”

“But—”

“She it is!” T.J. interceded. “I mean, she *she* is.” He rubbed his neck as if still worrying about a rifle bow tie. “Let’s get to battle!”

Alex rose to her feet.

I’ll admit that I was staring. Suddenly my whole perspective had flipped inside out, like when you look at an inkblot picture and see just the black part. Then your brain inverts the image and you realize the white part makes an entirely different picture, even though nothing has changed. That was Alex Fierro, except in pink and green. A second ago, he had been very obviously a boy to me. Now she was very obviously a girl.

“What?” she demanded.

“Nothing,” I lied.

Above us, more ravens began to circle, cawing accusingly.

“We’d better get moving,” Halfborn said. “The ravens don’t like slackers on the battlefield.”

Mallory drew her knives and turned toward Alex. “Come on, then, sweetheart. Let’s see what you can do.”



## Have You or Someone You Love Ever Suffered from Lindworms?

WE WADED into combat like one happy family.

Well, except for the fact that T.J. grabbed my arm and whispered, “Keep an eye on her, will you? I don’t want to get mauled from behind.”

So I brought up the rear with Alex Fierro.

We moved inland, picking our way through a field of corpses, all of whom we would see later, alive, at dinnertime. I could’ve taken some pretty funny photos, but camera phones were heavily discouraged on the field of combat. You know how it is. Somebody snaps a picture of you dead in an embarrassing pose, it makes the popular page on Instagram, then you get teased about it for centuries.

Halfborn and Mallory chopped us a path through a pack of berserkers. T.J. shot Charlie Flannigan in the head. Charlie thinks it is hilarious to get shot in the head. Don’t ask me why.

We dodged a volley of fiery tar balls from the balcony catapults. We had a brief sword battle with Big Lou from floor 401—great guy, but he always wants to die by decapitation. That’s hard, since Lou is almost seven feet tall. He seeks out Halfborn Gunderson on the battlefield since Halfborn is one of the few einherjar tall enough to oblige.

Somehow, we made it to the edge of the woods without getting stomped by a lindworm. T.J., Mallory, and Halfborn fanned out in front and led us into the shadows of the trees.

I moved warily through the underbrush, my shield up, my standard-issue combat sword heavy in my left hand. The sword wasn't nearly as well-balanced or as lethal as Jack, but it was a lot less talkative. Next to me, Alex strolled along, apparently unconcerned that she was empty-handed and the most brightly colored target in our group.

After a while, the silence got to me.

"I've seen you before," I told her. "Were you at the youth shelter on Winter Street?"

She sniffed. "I hated that place."

"Yeah. I lived on the streets for two years."

She arched her eyebrow, which made her amber left eye look paler and colder. "You think that makes us friends?"

Everything about her posture said, *Get away from me. Hate me or whatever. I don't care as long as you leave me alone.*

But I'm a contrary person. On the streets, plenty of homeless folks had acted belligerent toward me and pushed me away. They didn't trust anybody. Why should they? That just made me more determined to get to know them. The loners usually had the best stories. They were the most interesting and the savviest about staying alive.

Sam al-Abbas must've had some reason for bringing this kid to Valhalla. I wasn't going to let Fierro off the hook just because she had startling eyes, an impressive sweater-vest, and a tendency to hit people.

"What did you mean earlier?" I asked. "When you said—"

"Call me *she*? I'm gender fluid and transgender, idiot. Look it up if you need to, but it's not my job to educate—"

"That's not what I meant."

"Oh, please. I saw your mouth hanging open."

"Well, yeah. Maybe for a second. I was surprised. But..." I wasn't sure how to continue without sounding like even more of an idiot.

The gender thing wasn't what surprised me. A *huge* percentage of the homeless teens I'd met had been assigned one gender at birth but identified as another, or they felt like the whole boy/girl binary didn't apply to them. They ended up on the streets because—shocker—their families didn't accept them. Nothing says "tough love" like kicking your non-hetero-normative kid to the curb so they can experience abuse, drugs, high suicide rates, and constant physical danger. Thanks, Mom and Dad!

What surprised me was the way I'd reacted to Alex—how fast my impression of her had slingshot, and the kind of emotions that had stirred up. I wasn't sure I could put that into words without turning as red as Mallory Keen's hair.

"Wh-what I was sighing—*saying*—is when you were talking to the raven, you mentioned you were worried you'd been messed up. What did you mean?"

Alex looked like I'd just offered her a huge wedge of Limburger cheese. "Maybe I overreacted. I wasn't expecting to die today or get scooped up by some Valkyrie."

"That was Sam. She's okay."

Alex shook her head. "I *don't* forgive her. I got here and found out... whatever. I'm dead. Immortal. I'll never age and never change. I thought that meant..." Her voice frayed. "It doesn't matter."

I was pretty sure it mattered. I wanted to ask her about life back in Midgard, why she had an outdoor atrium just like mine in her suite, why all the pottery, why she would want to put the mark of Loki next to her initials on her work. I wondered if her arrival was just a coincidence...or whether it had something to do with the mark on Uncle Randolph's face in the photo and our sudden urgent need to find Thor's hammer.

On the other hand, I suspected that if I tried to ask her all that, she would turn into a mountain gorilla and rip my face off.

Happily, I was spared that fate when a lindworm crash-landed in front of us.

The monster hurtled out of the sky, flapping its ridiculous wings and roaring like a grizzly bear with a hundred-watt amp. Trees cracked and splintered under its weight as it landed in our midst.

"AWRGGG!" Halfborn yelled—which was Old Norse for *HOLY CRUD, THERE'S A DRAGON!*—just before the lindworm smacked him into the sky. Judging from the arc, Halfborn Gunderson was going to end up somewhere around floor twenty-nine, which would be a surprise to anyone relaxing on their balcony.

T.J. fired his rifle. Gun smoke blossomed harmlessly against the dragon's chest. Mallory yelled a curse in Gaelic and charged.

The lindworm ignored her and turned toward me.

I should mention...lindworms are ugly. Like if Freddy Krueger and a *Walking Dead* zombie had a child—that kind of ugly. Their faces have no flesh or hide, just a carapace of bone and exposed tendons, gleaming fangs, and dark, sunken eye sockets. When the monster opened its maw, I could see straight down its rotten-meat-colored throat.

Alex crouched, her hands fumbling for something at her belt. “This isn’t good.”

“No kidding.” My hand was so sweaty I could barely hold my sword. “You go right, I’ll go left. We’ll flank it—”

“No, I mean that isn’t just *any* dragon. That’s Grimwolf, one of the ancient worms.”

I stared up into the monster’s dark eye sockets. He *did* seem bigger than most of the lindworms I’d fought, but I was usually too busy dying to ask a dragon its age or name.

“How do you know?” I asked. “And why would anybody call a dragon Grimwolf?”

The lindworm hissed, filling the air with a scent like burning tires. Apparently he was sensitive about his name.

Mallory stabbed at the dragon’s legs, screaming more angrily the longer the lindworm ignored her. “Are you two going to help,” she called back at us, “or just stand there and chat?”

T.J. stabbed at the monster with his bayonet. The point just bounced off the creature’s ribs. Being a good soldier, T.J. backed up and tried again.

Alex tugged some sort of cord from her belt loops—a dull steel wire no thicker than a kite string, with simple wooden dowels on either end for handles. “Grimwolf is one of the dragons that live at the roots of Yggdrasil. He shouldn’t be here. No one would be crazy enough to...” Her face blanched, her expression hardening as if turning into lindworm bone. “He sent it for me. He knows I’m here.”

“Who?” I demanded. “What?”

“Distract him,” she ordered. She leaped into the nearest tree and began to climb. Even without turning into a gorilla, she could definitely move like one.

I took a shaky breath. “Distract him. Sure.”

The dragon snapped at Alex, biting off several tree branches. Alex moved fast, scampering higher up the trunk, but one or two more snaps and she’d be a lindworm Lunchable. Meanwhile, Mallory and T.J. were still

hacking away at the creature's legs and belly, but they were having no luck convincing the dragon to eat them.

*It's only a practice battle, I told myself. Charge in there, Magnus! Get yourself killed like a pro!*

That was the whole point of daily combat: to learn to fight any foe, to overcome our fear of death—because on the day of Ragnarok, we'd need all the skill and courage we could muster.

So why did I hesitate?

First, I'm way better at healing than I am at fighting. Oh, and running away—I'm *really* good at that. Also, it's hard to charge straight to your own demise, even if you know it won't be permanent—especially if that demise involves large amounts of pain.

The dragon snapped at Alex again, missing her rose high-tops by an inch.

As much as I hated dying, I hated even more seeing my comrades get killed. I screamed "FREY!" and ran at the lindworm.

Just my luck, Grimwolf was happy to turn his attention to me. When it comes to drawing aggro from ancient monsters, I've got the golden touch.

Mallory stumbled back out of my way, chucking one of her knives at the dragon's head. T.J. also retreated, yelling, "All yours, buddy!"

As far as encouraging words you might hear before an excruciating death go, those sucked pretty bad.

I raised my shield and sword like the nice instructors had demonstrated in Viking 101. The dragon's mouth opened wide, revealing several extra rows of teeth—just in case the outer row of teeth didn't kill me dead enough.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Alex swaying at the top of the tree—a tense bundle of pink and green, ready to spring. I realized what she was planning: she wanted to jump onto the dragon's neck. That was such a stupid plan it made me feel better about my own stupid way of dying.

The dragon struck. I jabbed my sword upward, hoping to impale the monster's upper palate.

Instead, a sudden pain blinded me. My face felt like it had been doused with industrial cleaning fluid. My knees buckled, which probably saved my life. The dragon bit empty air where my head had been a millisecond before.

Somewhere to my left, Mallory screamed, "Get up, you fool!"

I tried to blink away the pain. It only got worse. My nostrils filled with the stench of burning flesh.

Grimwolf recovered his balance, snarling with irritation.

Inside my head, a familiar voice said, *Come, now, my friend. Don't struggle!*

My vision doubled. I could still see the forest, the dragon looming over me, a small pink-and-green figure leaping toward the monster from the top of a tree. But there was another layer to reality—a gauzy white scene trying to burn its way through my corneas. I knelt in Uncle Randolph's study, in the Chase family mansion in Back Bay. Standing over me was someone much worse than a lindworm—Loki, the god of evil.

He grinned down at me. *There we are. How nice!*

At the same time, the dragon Grimwolf struck again, opening his maw to devour me whole.



## EIGHT

### I Am Saved from Certain Death by Being Killed

I'D NEVER EXISTED in two places at once before. I decided I didn't like it.

Through the pain, I was dimly aware of the fight in the forest—Grimwolf was about to bite me in half, when suddenly his head bucked upward; now Alex was straddling his neck, pulling her cord so tight around the dragon's throat that he thrashed and stuck out his forked black tongue.

T.J. and Mallory rushed in front of me, acting as a shield. They yelled at Grimwolf, waving their weapons and trying to herd him back.

I wanted to help them. I wanted to get to my feet or at least roll out of the way. But I was paralyzed, on my knees, trapped between Valhalla and my Uncle Randolph's study.

*I told you, Randolph!* Loki's voice dragged me further into the vision. *See? Blood is thicker than water. We have a solid connection!*

The hazy white scene resolved into full color. I knelt on the oriental carpet in front of Randolph's desk, sweating in a square of sunlight that was tinted green from the stained glass transom. The room smelled of lemon wood polish and burning meat. I was pretty sure the second odor was coming from my face.

In front of me stood Loki—his tousled hair the color of fall foliage, his delicately sculpted face marred by acid burns across his nose and cheekbones and suture scars around his lips.

He grinned and spread his arms in delight. *What do you think of my outfit?*

He was wearing an emerald green tuxedo with a frilly maroon shirt, a paisley bow tie, and a matching cummerbund. (If anything about the ensemble could be said to be *matching*.) A price tag dangled from his left coat sleeve.

I couldn't speak. I couldn't throw up, as much as I wanted to. I couldn't even offer him a free consultation at Blitzen's Best.

*No? Loki's expression soured. I told you, Randolph. You should've bought me the canary yellow one, too!*

A strangled sound came from my throat. "Magnus," said Uncle Randolph's voice, "don't listen—"

Loki extended his hand, the ends of his fingers smoking. He didn't touch me, but the pain across my face tripled, as though someone were branding me with an iron. I wanted to collapse, to beg Loki to stop, but I couldn't move.

I realized I was seeing everything through my uncle's eyes. I was inhabiting his body, feeling what he was experiencing. Loki was using Randolph as some sort of agony-operated telephone to contact me.

The pain eased, but Randolph's extra weight enveloped me like a lead wet suit. My lungs rattled. My worn-out knees ached. I didn't like being an old man.

*Now, now, Randolph, Loki chided, behave yourself. Magnus, I apologize about your uncle. Where was I? Oh, yes! Your invitation!*

Meanwhile, in Valhalla, I remained paralyzed on the battlefield while the dragon Grimwolf staggered around, knocking down entire swaths of forest. One of the lindworm's feet caught Mallory Keen, stomping her flat. T.J. yelled and waved pieces of his now-broken rifle, trying to draw the monster's attention. Somehow, Alex Fierro managed to stay on the dragon's neck, tightening her cord as Grimwolf whipped back and forth.

*A wedding! Loki announced cheerfully. He held up a green invitation, then folded it and tucked it into Randolph's shirt pocket. Five days from today! I apologize for the short notice, but I hope you can come, especially since it's up to you to bring the bride and the bride-price. Otherwise, well—war, invasion, Ragnarok, et cetera. A wedding will be much more fun! Now, let's see. How much has Samirah told you?*

My skull constricted until it felt like my brain would come out of my sinus cavity. A ragged scream escaped my lips, but I wasn't sure if it was mine or Uncle Randolph's.

From the dragon's neck, Alex yelled, "What's wrong with Magnus?"

T.J. ran to my side. "I don't know! His head is smoking! That's bad, right?"

"Grab his sword!" Alex pulled her cord tighter, causing black blood to trickle down the dragon's neck. "Get ready!"

*Oh, dear. Loki tapped me/Randolph on the nose. The pressure in my head subsided from blackout misery to moderate torture. Samirah hasn't shared. The poor thing is embarrassed, I suppose. I understand! It's difficult for me, too, giving away my favorite daughter. They grow up so quickly!*

I tried to speak. I wanted to say, *Go away! You suck! Get out of my head and leave Samirah alone!*

It came out as "Gaaaaah."

*No need to thank me, Loki said. Neither of us wants Ragnarok to start just yet, eh? And I'm the only one who can help you! It wasn't an easy negotiation, but I can be very persuasive. The hammer in exchange for the bride. A one-time offer. I'll tell you more when you secure the bride-price.*

"Now!" Alex yelled. She pulled her wire so hard the dragon arched his back, separating the segments of armored hide that protected his belly. T.J. charged forward and thrust my practice sword into a soft spot below Grimwolf's heart. T.J. rolled aside as the monster came down with his full weight, impaling himself. Alex leaped from the lindworm's neck, her garrote dangling from one hand, slick with blood.

*Was that Alex I heard? Loki curled his scarred lip. She's not invited to the wedding. She'll ruin everything. In fact—Loki's eyes gleamed with mischief—give her a little present for me, will you?*

My lungs tightened, even worse than when I was an asthmatic kid. My body began to superheat; I was in so much pain my organs seemed to be dissolving into molecules, my skin glowing and steaming. Loki was turning my brain to fire, filling me with flashes of memories that weren't mine—centuries of anger and the need for revenge.

I tried to push him out of my head. I tried to breathe.

Alex Fierro stood over me, frowning. Her face and Loki's melded together.

“Your friend is going to explode,” Alex said, as if this were a perfectly normal thing that happened to people.

T.J. wiped his brow. “What exactly do you mean...*explode*?”

“I mean Loki is channeling power through him,” Alex said. “It’s too much. Magnus will blow up, destroying most of this courtyard.”

I gritted my teeth. I managed one word: “*Run*. ”

“It won’t help,” Alex told me. “Don’t worry, I’ve got a solution.”

She stepped forward and calmly wrapped her metal wire around my neck.

I managed another word: “*Wait*. ”

“It’s the only way to get him out of your head.” Alex’s brown and amber eyes were impossible to read. She winked at me...or maybe that was Loki, his face glowing hazily just under Alex’s skin.

*See you soon, Magnus*, said the god.

Alex yanked both ends of her garrote and snuffed out my life.



## Never Take a Bubble Bath with a Decapitated God

SOMEONE PLEASE explain to me why I have to dream when I'm dead.

There I was, floating in the darkness of nonexistence, minding my own business, trying to get over the fact that I'd just been decapitated. Then I got dropped into these weird vivid nightmares. *Really* annoying.

I found myself on a thirty-foot yacht in the middle of a storm. The deck heaved. Waves crashed over the bow. Sheets of gray rain slammed into the wheelhouse windows.

In the captain's chair sat Uncle Randolph, one hand clenching the wheel, the other strangling his radio handset. His yellow raincoat dripped puddles around his feet. His close-shaved head glistened with salt water. In front of him, the control board's monitors showed nothing but static.

"Mayday!" He yelled into the handset like it was a stubborn dog refusing to do a trick. "Mayday, curse you. Mayday!"

On the bench behind him, a woman and two young girls huddled together. I'd never known them in life, but I recognized them from photographs in Uncle Randolph's office. Perhaps because I had just been inside Randolph's head, I was able to pull their names from his memories: his wife, Caroline; and his daughters, Aubrey and Emma.

Caroline sat in the middle, her dark brown hair plastered against her face, her arms around her daughters' shoulders. "It'll be all right," she told the girls. She glanced at Randolph with a silent accusation: *Why have you done this to us?*

Aubrey, the youngest, had the Chase family's wavy blond hair. Her head was bowed, her face set in deep concentration. She held a model of the yacht in her lap, trying to keep the toy level despite the fifteen-foot swells that rocked the wheelhouse, as if by doing so she could help her father.

Emma was not as calm. She looked about ten, with dark hair like her mother's and sad, weary eyes like her father's. Somehow I knew that she'd been the most excited about this trip. She had insisted on coming along for Dad's big adventure—his search for a missing Viking sword that would finally prove his theories. Dad would be a hero! Randolph had not been able to refuse her.

Now, though, Emma trembled with fear. The faint scent of urine told me that her bladder was not holding up under the stress. With each pitch of the boat, Emma shrieked and clutched a pendant to her chest—a runestone Randolph had given her for her last birthday. I couldn't see the symbol, but somehow I knew what it was:



*Othala*: inheritance. Randolph saw Emma as his successor, the next great historian-archaeologist of the family.

"I'll bring us home." Randolph's voice cracked with despair.

He had been so sure of his plans, and confident about the weather. They would make an easy trip from the harbor. He had done extremely thorough research. He knew the Sword of Summer must lie at the bottom of Massachusetts Bay. He imagined himself making one quick dive. The old gods of Asgard would bless his efforts. He would bring the sword to the surface and lift its blade into the sunlight for the first time in a thousand years. His family would be there to witness his triumph.

Yet here they were, caught in a freak tempest, their yacht being thrown about like the toy in Aubrey's lap.

The boat rolled to starboard. Emma screamed.

A wall of water engulfed me.

I surfaced in a different dream. My disembodied head bobbed up and down in a full bathtub that smelled of strawberry soap and mildewed washcloths.

To my right floated a cheerful rubber ducky with worn-away eyes. To my left floated the not-so-cheerful head of the god Mimir. Seaweed and dead minnows swirled in his beard. Bubble bath foam dribbled from his eyes, ears, and nose.

“I’m telling ya”—his voice echoed in the tiled bathroom—“you guys gotta go. And not just because I’m your boss. Destiny *demands* it.”

He wasn’t talking to me. Next to the tub, sitting on a lovely avocado porcelain commode, was my friend Hearthstone, his shoulders slumped, his expression despondent. He wore his usual black leather coat and pants, a starched white shirt, and a polka-dotted scarf that looked like it had been cut from a Twister game mat. His spiky blond hair was almost as pale as his face.

Hearth gesticulated in sign language, so quickly and with such annoyance that I could only catch some of his words: *Too dangerous....death...protect this idiot.*

He pointed to Blitzen, who leaned against the sink with his arms crossed. The dwarf was as dapper as always in a walnut colored three-piece suit that matched his skin tone, a bow tie as black as his beard, and a Frank Sinatra-style hat that somehow pulled the whole look together.

“We have to go,” Blitz insisted. “The kid *needs* us.”

I wanted to tell them how much I missed them, how much I wanted to see them, but also that they shouldn’t risk their lives for me. Unfortunately, when I opened my mouth, the only thing that came out was a goldfish frantically wriggling its way to freedom.

My face pitched forward into the bubbles. When I surfaced again, the dream had changed.

I was still a disembodied head, but now I was floating in a massive open jar filled with pickles and vinegar. It was difficult to see through the greenish liquid and the curved glass, but I seemed to be on a bar. Neon drink ads glowed on the walls. Huge, hazy shapes sat hunched on the stools. Laughter and conversation sent ripples through the pickle juice.

I didn’t spend a lot of time in bars. I certainly didn’t spend a lot of time staring at one through a filthy pickle jar. But something about this place seemed familiar—the arrangement of the tables, the diamond-patterned beveled glass window on the opposite wall, even the rack of wineglasses suspended above me like pendant lamps.

A new shape moved into my vision—someone even larger than the patrons and dressed all in white. “GET OUT!” Her voice was harsh and ragged, as if she spent her spare time gargling gasoline. “ALL OF YOU, OUT! I WOULD TALK TO MY BROTHER!”

With a lot of grumbling, the crowd dispersed. The bar fell silent except for the sound of a TV somewhere across the room—a sports broadcast, a commentator saying, “Oh, would you look at that, Bill? His head came right off!”

I took that comment personally.

At the far end of the bar, someone else moved—a figure so dark and large I had thought it was just a shadow.

“It’s my bar.” His voice was a deep baritone, huffy and wet. If a bull walrus could speak English, he would sound like that. “Why do you always kick out my friends?”

“*Friends?*” the woman yelled. “They are your *subjects*, Thrym, not your friends! Start acting like a king!”

“I am!” the man said. “I’m going to destroy Midgard!”

“Huh. I’ll believe *that* when I see it. If you were a real king, you would’ve used that hammer immediately rather than hide it away and dither for months about what to do. You certainly wouldn’t trade it to that no-good \_\_\_\_\_”

“It’s an alliance, Thrynga!” the man bellowed. I doubted this guy Thrym was really a walrus, but I imagined him hopping from flipper to flipper, his whiskers bristling. “You don’t understand how important that is. I *need* allies in order to take on the human world. Once I have married Samirah al-Abbas \_\_\_\_\_”

*BLOOP.*

I didn’t mean to, but as soon as I’d heard Samirah’s name, I screamed inside my pickle jar, causing a huge bubble to break the surface of the greasy green liquid.

“What was that?” Thrym demanded.

The white shape of Thrynga loomed over me. “It came from the pickle jar.” She said this like it was the title of a horror film.

“Well, kill it!” Thrym yelled.

Thrynga picked up a barstool and whacked my jar with it, hurling me against the wall and leaving me on the floor in a puddle of pickles, juice, and broken glass.

I woke up in my own bed, gasping for air. My hands flew to my neck.

Thank Frey, my head was once again attached to my body. My nostrils still burned from the scent of pickles and strawberry bubble bath.

I tried to parse what had just happened—which parts were real, and which were dreams. The dragon Grimwolf. Alex Fierro and her garrote. Loki burning his way inside my head, somehow using Uncle Randolph to get to me. His warning about a wedding in five days.

All that had actually happened.

Unfortunately, my dreams seemed just as concrete. I'd been with Randolph on his boat the day his family had perished. His memories were now tangled with mine. His anguish sat on my chest like a block of steel—his loss of Caroline, Aubrey, and Emma felt as painful to me as the death of my own mother. Worse, in a way, because Randolph had never gotten any kind of closure. He still suffered every hour of every day.

The rest of the visions: Hearthstone and Blitzen coming to help me. I should have been elated, but I remembered Hearthstone's frantic signs: *Too dangerous. Death.*

And the scene from the pickle jar. What the Helheim was that? Those mystery siblings, Thrym and Thrynga—I was willing to bet fifty pieces of red gold and a falafel dinner that they were giants. The one named Thrym had Thor's hammer and planned on trading it for—I swallowed back pickle-flavored bile—for Sam.

*It's up to you to bring the bride and the bride-price,* Loki had said. *An alliance. A one-time offer.*

Loki must have been out of his mind. He wanted to "help us" get Thor's hammer back by marrying off Samirah?

Why hadn't Sam said anything about this?

*The poor thing is embarrassed,* Loki had said.

I remembered the urgency in Sam's voice when we'd talked at the café, the way her fingers had trembled on her coffee cup. No wonder she needed to find the hammer so badly. It wasn't just to save the world from invasion, blah, blah, blah. We were always saving the world. Sam wanted to prevent this marriage deal.

But why would she even think she'd have to honor such a stupid trade? Loki had no right to tell her what to do. She was betrothed to Amir. She loved the guy. I would raise an army of einherjar, magic elves, and well-

dressed dwarves and burn down Jotunheim before I let them coerce my friend.

Whatever the case, I needed to talk to her again, and soon.

I struggled out of bed. My knees still felt worn and achy like Randolph's, though I knew it was only in my head. I limped to my closet, wishing I had my uncle's cane.

I got dressed and retrieved my phone from the kitchenette.

The screen read 7:02 P.M. I was late for Valhalla's nightly feast.

I'd never taken so long to resurrect after dying in battle. Usually I was one of the first ones reborn. I remembered Alex Fierro standing over me, calmly slicing off my head with her garrote.

I checked my texts. Still nothing from Annabeth. I shouldn't have been surprised, but I kept hoping. I needed my cousin's outside perspective right now, her smarts, her assurance that I could handle all the weirdness.

My door blew open. Three ravens flew in, spiraled around my head, then landed in the lowest branch of the atrium tree. They glared at me the way only ravens can do, like I was not worthy of being their roadkill dinner.

"I know I'm late," I told them. "I just woke up."

CAW!

CAW!

CAW!

Most likely translation:

"GET!"

"MOVING!"

"STUPID!"

Samirah would be at the feast. Maybe I could talk to her.

I grabbed my neck chain and slipped it over my head. The runestone pendant felt comfortingly warm against my collarbone, as though Jack were trying to reassure me. Or maybe he was just in a good mood after an enjoyable date with a fine spear. Either way, I was glad to have him back.

I got the feeling I wouldn't be using a practice sword for the next five days. Things were about to get Jack-worthy.



## The Most Awkward Viking Luau Ever

AS IF DRAGON Thursday wasn't bad enough, it was also theme night in the feast hall: Hawaiian luau.

Ugh.

I understood that the management needed to keep things interesting, especially for warriors who had been waiting here for Doomsday since the Middle Ages. Still, the luau seemed a little cultural appropriation-y to me. (Vikings were notorious for appropriating from other cultures. Also for pillaging and burning said cultures.) Besides, seeing thousands of einherjar in Hawaiian shirts and flower leis was like getting a neon-paint grenade between the eyes.

The feast hall was packed right up to the nosebleed section—hundreds of tables arranged like stadium seating, all facing the central court, where a tree as big as the Prudential Center spread its branches across the vast domed roof. Near its roots, turning on a spit above the fire pit, was our usual dinner: the carcass of Saehrimnir the feast beast, who tonight wore a lovely necklace of orchids. Stuffed in his mouth was a pineapple the size of Wisconsin.

Valkyries flew back and forth across the hall, filling pitchers, serving food, and somehow managing to avoid setting their grass skirts on fire in the tiki torches that flickered along the aisles.

“Magnus!” T.J. called, waving me over. His rifle was propped next to him, the broken stock patched up with duct tape.

We didn't have assigned tables. That would've cut down on the fun of fighting each other for the best seats. Tonight, my hallmates had scored a great location on the third tier, a few rows from the thanes' table.

"There's our sleepy boy!" Halfborn grinned, his teeth flecked with roasted Saehrimnir. "*Alicarl*, my friend!"

Mallory elbowed him. "It's *aloha*, moron." She rolled her eyes at me. "*Alicarl* is Norse for fatso, as Halfborn knows perfectly well."

"Close enough!" Halfborn pounded his goblet to get the Valkyries' attention. "Some mead and meat for my friend!"

I took a seat between Mallory and T.J. Soon I had a cold mug of mead and a hot plate of Saehrimnir with biscuits and gravy. Despite all the craziness I'd gone through today, I had a huge appetite—getting resurrected always did that to me. I dug in.

Sitting at the thanes' table was the usual assortment of famous dead people. I recognized Jim Bowie, Crispus Attucks, and Ernie Pyle, all of whom had died bravely in combat, along with Helgi, the hotel manager, and some other ancient Viking dudes. The central throne for Odin was empty, as usual. Sam supposedly received orders from the All-Father once in a while, but Odin hadn't appeared in person since the end of our quest back in January. Probably he was working on his next book—*Five Days to Your Best Ragnarok Ever!*—and the accompanying PowerPoint presentation.

To the left of the thanes was the table of honor. Tonight, it was occupied by only two people: Alex Fierro and her Valkyrie sponsor, Samirah al-Abbas. This meant that, in all the Nine Worlds, in the last twenty-four hours, only Alex had died a death worthy of Valhalla.

That wasn't necessarily unusual. The nightly numbers ranged from zero to twelve. Still, I couldn't shake the feeling that nobody else had died bravely today merely because they didn't want to share a table with Alex. Two Valkyrie guards stood behind her as if ready to prevent an escape attempt.

Sam's body language looked pretty stiff. I was too far away to hear, but I imagined her conversation with Alex was something like:

Sam: *Awkward.*

Alex: *Awkward, awkward.*

Sam (nodding): *Awkward, awkward, awkward.*

Next to me, T.J. pushed away his empty plate. "Some combat today. I've never seen anyone do that"—he drew a line across his neck—"so quick and

cold.”

I resisted the urge to touch my throat. “First time I’ve been decapitated.”

“Not fun, is it?” Mallory said. “What was going on with you, steaming and threatening to explode like that?”

I’d known my hallmates a while now. I trusted them like family—and I mean like *Annabeth* family, not *Uncle Randolph* family. I told them everything: Loki in his ghastly green tuxedo inviting me to a wedding; the dreams about my uncle, Hearth and Blitz, and the giant siblings in the bar.

“Thrym?” Halfborn Gunderson picked some biscuit out of his beard. “I know that name from the old legends. He was one of the earth giant kings, but it couldn’t be the same guy. That Thrym was killed good and proper centuries ago.”

I thought about Otis the goat, who could supposedly re-form from the mist of Ginnungagap. “Giants don’t, like, resurrect?”

Halfborn scoffed. “Not that I’ve ever heard of. Probably this is another Thrym. It’s a common name. Still, if he has Thor’s hammer—”

“We should probably not spread the news that it’s missing,” I said.

“Too right,” Mallory grumbled. “You say this giant plans on marrying...” Her finger drifted in the direction of Samirah. “Does Sam know about this scheme?”

“I need to ask her,” I said. “Either way, we’ve got five days. Then, if this giant Thrym doesn’t get his bride—”

“He jumps on the telegraph,” T.J. said, “and he tells all the other giants that he’s got Thor’s hammer. Then they invade Midgard.”

I decided not to remind T.J. that no one used telegraphs anymore.

Halfborn picked up his steak knife and started cleaning his teeth. “Don’t understand why this Thrym fellow waited so long. If he’s had the hammer for months, why aren’t we already under attack?”

I didn’t have an answer, but I imagined it had something to do with Loki. As always, he would be whispering in people’s ears, manipulating events from behind the scenes. Whatever Loki wanted from this weird marriage transaction, I was sure of one thing: he wasn’t trying to get Thor’s hammer back just because he was a swell guy.

I stared across the hall at Alex Fierro. I remembered what she had said on the battlefield when we faced Grimwolf: *He sent it for me. He knows I’m here.*

Mallory nudged me. “You’re thinking the same thing, eh? Can’t be a coincidence that Alex Fierro arrived in the midst of all this. You think Loki sent her?”

I felt like the bathtub goldfish was wriggling its way back down my throat. “How could Loki arrange for someone to become an einherji?”

“Oh, my friend...” T.J. shook his head. The combination of his floral-patterned Hawaiian shirt with his Union Army jacket made him look like a detective from *Hawaii Five-0: 1862*. “How could Loki release an elder lindworm into Valhalla? How could he help Johnny Reb win the First Battle of Bull Run?”

“Loki did what?”

“My point is, Loki can do many things,” T.J. said. “Don’t ever underestimate him.”

It was good advice. Still...staring at Alex Fierro, I had trouble believing she was a spy. Terrifying and dangerous, yes. A pain in the loincloth, sure. But working for her father?

“Wouldn’t Loki pick somebody who...blended in a little more?” I asked. “Besides, when Loki was in my head, he told me not to bring Alex to this wedding. He said she would ruin everything.”

“Reverse psychology,” Halfborn suggested, still working the knife between his teeth.

Mallory snorted. “What do you know about psychology, you oaf?”

“Or reverse reverse reverse psychology!” Halfborn wriggled his bushy eyebrows. “That Loki is a tricky one.”

Mallory threw a baked potato at him. “All I’m saying is that Alex Fierro bears watching. After she killed the lindworm—”

“With a little help from me,” T.J. added.

“—she disappeared into the woods. She left T.J. and me to fend for ourselves. Then the rest of the dragons descended on us out of nowhere—”

“And killed us,” T.J. said. “Yes, that was a little odd....”

Halfborn grunted. “Fierro is a child of Loki, and an argr. You can’t trust an argr in combat.”

Mallory swatted his arm. “Your attitude is more offensive than your smell.”

“I find your offense offensive!” Halfborn protested. “Argrs aren’t warriors. That’s all I meant!”

“Okay, what is an argr?” I asked. “When you first said it, I thought it was a monster. Then I thought maybe it was another word for pirate, like *one who arghs*. Does it mean a transgender person or what?”

“Literally, it means *unmanly*,” Mallory said. “It’s a deadly insult among big loutish Vikings like this guy.” She poked Halfborn in the chest.

“Bah,” said Halfborn. “It’s only an offense if you call someone argr who isn’t argr. Gender-fluid people are hardly a new thing, Magnus. There were plenty of argr among the Norse. They serve their purposes. Some of the greatest priests and sorcerers were...” He made circles in the air with his steak knife. “You know.”

Mallory frowned at me. “My boyfriend is a Neanderthal.”

“Not at all!” Halfborn said. “I’m an enlightened modern man from the year 865 C.E. Now, if you talk to those einherjar from 700 C.E., well...they’re not as open-minded about such things.”

T.J. sipped his mead, his eyes fixed in the distance. “During the war, we had a scout from the Lenape tribe. Called himself—or herself—Mother William.”

“That’s an awful war name!” Halfborn complained. “Who would tremble in terror before someone called Mother William?”

T.J. shrugged. “I’ll admit most of us didn’t know what to make of him. His identity seemed to change day to day. He said he had two spirits in his body, one male and one female. But I’m telling you—great scout. Saved us from an ambush during the march through Georgia.”

I watched Alex eat her dinner, gingerly picking pieces of carrot and potato from her plate. It was hard to believe that a few hours ago those same delicate fingers had taken down a dragon—and cut off my head—with a wire.

Halfborn leaned toward me. “There’s no shame in being attracted, Magnus.”

I choked on a piece of feast beast. “What? No, I wasn’t—”

“Staring?” Halfborn grinned. “You know, Frey’s priests were very fluid. During the harvest festival, they used to wear dresses and do some *amazing* dances—”

“You’re messing with me,” I said.

“Nope.” Halfborn chuckled. “One time in Uppsala, I met this lovely—” His story was cut short by the sound of horns echoing through the hall.

At the thanes' table, Helgi rose. Since this morning, he'd repaired his suit jacket and clipped his beard, but he was now wearing an oversize war helmet—probably to hide the damage Alex Fierro had done to his dead-buzzard hairdo.

"Einherjar!" his voice boomed. "Tonight, only one fallen warrior has joined us, but I'm told the story of his death is quite impressive." He scowled at Samirah al-Abbas as if to say, *It had better be.* "Rise, Alex Fierro, and dazzle us with your glorious deeds!"



## What's a Guy Gotta Do to Get a Standing Ovation?

ALEX DIDN'T LOOK excited about having to dazzle us.

She rose, tugging at her sweater-vest, then scanned the crowd as if challenging each and every warrior to a duel.

"Alex, son of Loki!" Helgi began.

"*Daughter*," Alex corrected him. "Unless I tell you otherwise, it's daughter."

At the end of the thanes' table, Jim Bowie coughed into his mead cup.  
"What, now?"

Ernie Pyle muttered something in Bowie's ear. They put their heads together. Pyle brought out his journalist's notepad and a pen. He seemed to be drawing Bowie a diagram.

Helgi's face twitched. "As you wish, daughter of Loki—"

"And don't feel obliged to mention my dad," Alex added. "I don't like him very much."

A ripple of nervous laughter went around the room. Next to Alex, Samirah clenched her fists as if warming up her strangling muscles. I doubted she was mad at Alex—Sam didn't like Loki either. But if for any reason the thanes decided Alex wasn't a worthy choice for Valhalla, Sam could get kicked out of the Valkyries and exiled to Midgard. I knew this because that's what had happened when she'd introduced me.

"Very well, person who is the child of some parent." Helgi's voice was as dry as Odin's empty eye socket. "Let us watch your exploits, courtesy of

Valkyrie Vision!"

These Vikings today and their new-fangled technology...Around the trunk of the Tree of Laeradr, huge holographic screens winked into existence. Footage from Samirah's Valkyrie body-cam began to play.

Sam was an expert at trigonometry, calculus, and aviation, so you'd think she could figure out how to use a camera. Nope. She always forgot when to turn it on and off. Half the time her videos came out sideways because she'd clipped the camera on wrong. Sometimes she recorded entire missions where the camera showed nothing but her own nostrils.

Tonight the video quality was good, but Sam had started recording way too early. Time stamp 7:03 that morning: we were treated to a view of her grandparents' living room—a small but tidy space with a low coffee table and two suede sofas. Over the fireplace hung a framed piece of Arabic calligraphy—a swirling gold ink design on white parchment. Proudly displayed on the mantel underneath were pictures of Sam as a toddler with a toy plane, as a middle schooler on the soccer field, and as a high schooler holding a large trophy.

As soon as Sam realized where the video had started, she stifled a yelp. But there was nothing she could do to stop it.

The video panned left to a dining area where three older people sat drinking tea from fancy gold-rimmed teacups. One guy I knew: Abdel Fadlan, the owner of Fadlan's Falafel. There was no mistaking his mane of silver hair and that tailored blue business suit. The other two must have been Sam's grandparents, Jid and Bibi. Jid looked like Santa Claus or Ernest Hemingway—barrel-chested and moonfaced with a snowy beard and lots of smile wrinkles, though today he was frowning. He wore a gray suit that had probably fit him twenty years and twenty pounds ago. Bibi wore an elegantly embroidered red-and-gold dress with a matching hijab. She sat with perfect poise, like royalty, as she poured tea for her guest, Mr. Fadlan.

From the angle of the camera, I guessed Samirah was sitting on a chair between the two sofas. About ten feet away, in front of the fireplace, Amir Fadlan paced in agitation, running his hands through his slick dark hair. He looked as dashing as always in his skinny jeans, white T-shirt, and stylish vest, but his usual easy smile was gone. His expression was anguished, like someone had stomped on his heart.

"Sam, I don't understand," he said. "I love you!"

The entire crowd in the feast hall went "Ooh!"

“Shut up!” Samirah snapped at them, which only made them laugh. I could see that it was taking all her willpower not to cry.

The video fast-forwarded. I watched as Sam flew to meet me at the Thinking Cup, then got a message on her phone for a possible code 381.

She flew from the coffee shop and sped across the park toward Downtown Crossing.

She spiraled down and floated over a dark dead-end alley between two dilapidated theaters. I knew exactly where it was, right around the corner from a homeless shelter. Heroin junkies liked to shoot up in that alley, which made it a great place to get beaten, robbed, or killed.

At the moment Sam arrived, it was also a great place to get attacked by vicious glowing wolves.

Against the back wall, three large beasts had cornered a grizzled homeless guy. The only thing between him and certain death was a Roche Bros. shopping cart filled with cans for recycling.

My dinner congealed in my gut. The wolves brought back too many memories of my mother’s murder. Even if they hadn’t been the size of full-grown horses, I would’ve known they weren’t regular Midgard wolves. Blue phosphorescent mist clung to their fur, throwing aquarium-like ripples of light across the brick walls. Their faces were too expressive, with human-like eyes and sneering lips. These were the children of Fenris. They padded back and forth, snarling and sniffing the air, enjoying the scent of fear coming from their prey.

“Back!” the old man croaked, jabbing his grocery cart toward the animals. “I told you, I don’t want it! I don’t believe in it!”

In the feast hall, the assembled einherjar muttered with disapproval.

I’d heard stories about some modern demigods—sons and daughters of Norse gods or goddesses—who refused to accept their destiny. They turned their backs on the weirdness of the Nine Worlds. Instead of fighting when monsters appeared, they ran and hid. Some decided they were legitimately crazy. They took meds. They checked themselves into hospitals. Others became alcoholics or junkies and ended up on the streets. This guy must have been one of them.

I could feel the pity and disgust in the feast hall. This old man might have spent his whole life running, but now he was trapped. Rather than come to Valhalla as a hero, he would die a coward’s death and go to the cold land of Hel—the worst fate any einherji could imagine.

Then, at the mouth of the alley, a voice yelled, “Hey!”

Alex Fierro had arrived. She stood with her feet planted apart, her fists on her waist like Supergirl—if Supergirl had green hair and sported a pink-and-green sweater-vest.

Alex must have been passing by. Maybe she heard the old man shouting or the wolves growling. There was no reason she had to get involved. The wolves were so focused on their prey they never would have noticed her.

Yet she charged the beasts, morphing as she moved and launching herself into battle as a German shepherd.

Despite the size difference, Alex managed to knock the largest wolf off its feet. She sank her fangs into its neck. The beast writhed and snarled, but Alex jumped away before it could bite back. As the wounded wolf staggered, the other two attacked her.

As quick as flowing water, Alex changed back to human form. She lashed out with her wire, using it like a whip. With a single flick, one of the wolves lost its head.

“Ooh!” the audience said with appreciation.

Before she could strike again, the other wolf tackled her. The two of them rolled across the alley. Alex changed to a German shepherd again, clawing and biting, but she was out of her weight class.

“Turn into something bigger,” I found myself murmuring. But for whatever reason, Alex didn’t.

I’d always liked dogs—more than I liked most people, and *definitely* more than wolves. It was hard to watch as the wolf tore into the German shepherd, ripping at Alex’s snout and throat, matting her fur with blood. Finally, Alex managed to change form—shrinking into a lizard and skittering out from under her attacker. She turned human again a few feet away, her clothes in tatters, her face a horror show of slashes and bite marks.

Unfortunately, the first wolf had recovered its wits. It howled in rage—a sound that echoed through the alley and ricocheted off the surrounding buildings. I realized it was the same howl I’d heard from across town while I fought the goat-assassin.

Together, the two remaining wolves advanced toward Alex, their blue eyes flickering with hatred.

Alex fumbled with the sweater tied around her waist. One reason she wore it became evident: it concealed a hunting knife at her belt. She drew the weapon and tossed it toward the homeless guy.

“Help me!” she yelled. “Fight!”

The blade skittered across the asphalt. The old man backed away, keeping his shopping cart between himself and the battle.

The wolves lunged at Alex.

Finally, she tried to change into something larger—maybe a buffalo or a bear, it was hard to tell—but I guess she didn’t have enough strength. She collapsed back into human form as the wolves tackled her and brought her down.

She fought ferociously, wrapping her garrote around the neck of one wolf, kicking the other, but she was outmatched and had lost too much blood. She managed to choke the larger wolf. It slumped over, crushing her. The last beast took her by the throat. She wrapped her fingers around its neck, but her eyes were losing focus.

Much too late, the old man picked up the knife. He edged toward the last wolf. With a horrified shriek, he drove the blade into its back.

The monster fell dead.

The old man stepped away from the scene—three dead wolves, their fur still glowing in faint clouds of neon blue; Alex Fierro, her final breath rattling in her chest, a pool of blood spreading around her like a halo.

The old man dropped the knife and ran away sobbing.

The camera zoomed in as Samirah al-Abbas descended toward the fallen warrior. Sam reached out. From the broken body of Alex Fierro, a shimmering golden spirit floated up, already scowling at the unexpected summons.

The video went dark. It did not show Alex arguing with Sam, punching her in the eye, or causing chaos when she finally reached Valhalla. Maybe Sam’s camera ran out of batteries. Or maybe Sam intentionally ended the video there to make Alex look like more of a hero.

The feast hall was quiet except for the crackle of tiki torches. Then the einherjar burst into applause.

The thanes rose to their feet. Jim Bowie wiped a tear from his eye. Ernie Pyle blew his nose. Even Helgi, who had looked so angry a few minutes ago, openly wept as he clapped for Alex Fierro.

Samirah looked around, clearly stunned by the reaction.

Alex might as well have been a statue. Her eyes stayed fixed on the dark place where the video screen had been, as if she could make her death rewind by sheer force of will.

Once the ovation quieted, Helgi raised his goblet. “Alex Fierro, you fought against great odds, with no thought for your own safety, to save a weaker man. You offered this man a weapon, a chance to redeem himself in battle and achieve Valhalla! Such bravery and honor in a child of Loki is...is truly exceptional.”

Sam looked like she had some choice words to share with Helgi, but she was interrupted by another round of applause.

“It’s true,” Helgi continued, “that we have learned not to judge Loki’s children too harshly. Recently, Samirah al-Abbas was accused of un-Valkyrie-like behavior, and we forgave her. Here again is proof of our wisdom!”

More applause. The thanes nodded and patted each other on the back as if to say, *Yes, wow! We really are wise and open-minded! We deserve cookies!*

“Not only that,” Helgi added, “but such heroism from an argr!” He grinned at the other thanes to share his amazement. “I don’t even know what to say. Truly, Alex Fierro, you have risen above what we would expect from one of your kind. To Alex Fierro!” he toasted. “To bloody death!”

“BLOODY DEATH!” the crowd roared.

No one else seemed to notice how tightly Alex was clenching her fists, or the way she glared at the thanes’ table. My guess was that she hadn’t appreciated some of his word choices.

Helgi didn’t bother calling a *vala*, or seer, to read Alex’s destiny in the runes like he did when I first arrived in Valhalla. He must have figured the thanes already knew that Fierro would do great things when we all charged to our deaths at Ragnarok.

The einherjar kicked into full party mode. They laughed and wrestled and called for more mead. Valkyries buzzed around in their grass skirts and leis, filling pitchers as fast as they could. Musicians struck up some Norse dance tunes that sounded like acoustic death metal performed by feral cats.

For me, two things dampened the party mood.

First, Mallory Keen turned toward me. “You still think Alex is a legitimate einherji? If Loki wanted to place an agent in Valhalla, he couldn’t have arranged a better introduction....”

The thought made me feel like I was back on Randolph’s boat, being tossed around in fifteen-foot swells. I wanted to give Alex the benefit of the doubt. Sam had told me it was impossible to cheat your way into Valhalla.

Then again, since becoming an einherji, I ate impossible for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

The second thing that happened: I caught a flash of movement somewhere above me. I glanced at the ceiling, expecting to see a high-flying Valkyrie or maybe one of the animals that lived in the Tree of Laeradr. Instead, a hundred feet up, almost lost in the gloom, a figure in black reclined in the crook of a branch, slow clapping as he watched our celebration. On his head was a steel helmet with the face mask of a wolf.

Before I could even say, *Hey, look, there's a goat-killer in the tree*, I blinked and he was gone. From the spot where he'd been sitting, a single leaf fluttered down and landed in my mead cup.



## Samirah and Magnus Sitting in a Tree, T-A-L-K-I-N-G

AS THE CROWDS streamed out of the hall, I spotted Samirah flying away.

“Hey!” I shouted, but there was no way she could’ve heard me over the rowdy einherjar.

I pulled off my pendant and summoned Jack. “Fly after Sam, will you? Tell her I need to talk to her.”

“I can do better than that,” Jack said. “Hang on.”

“Whoa. You can *carry* me?”

“For a short hop, yeah.”

“Why didn’t you tell me that sooner?”

“I totally mentioned it! Plus, it’s in the owner’s manual.”

“Jack, you don’t have an owner’s manual.”

“Just hang on. Of course, once you put me back in pendant form, you’ll feel—”

“Like I’ve been carrying myself through the air,” I guessed. “And I’ll pass out or whatever. Fine. Let’s go.”

There was nothing graceful about flying Jack Air. I did not look like a superhero or a Valkyrie. I looked like a guy dangling from the hilt of a sword as it shot skyward—my butt clenched, my legs swinging wildly. I lost a shoe somewhere over the twentieth tier. I nearly fell to my death a couple of times. Otherwise, yeah, great experience.

When we got within a few feet of Sam, I yelled, “On your left!”

She turned, hovering in midair. “Magnus, what are you—? Oh, hey, Jack.”

“Sup, Lion Lady? Can we put down somewhere? This guy is heavy.”

We landed on the nearest branch. I told Sam about the goat-assassin lurking in Laeradr, and she zipped off to alert the Valkyries. About five minutes later she came back, just in time to cut short Jack’s rendition of “Hands to Myself.”

“That is disturbing,” Sam said.

“I know,” I said. “Jack *cannot* sing Selena Gomez.”

“No, I mean the assassin,” Sam said. “He’s disappeared. We’ve got the entire hotel staff on alert, but”—she shrugged—“he’s nowhere.”

“Can I finish my song now?” Jack asked.

“No!” Sam and I said.

I almost told Jack to go back to pendant form. Then I remembered that if he did, I would probably pass out for twelve hours.

Sam settled on the branch next to me.

Far below, the last of the dinner crowd was exiting the hall. My friends from floor nineteen, T.J., Mallory, and Halfborn, surrounded Alex Fierro and guided her along. From here it was hard to tell if this was a congratulatory “buddy” kind of escort or a forced march to make sure she didn’t kill anyone.

Sam followed my gaze. “You’ve got doubts about her, I know. But she deserves to be here, Magnus. The way she died...I’m as sure about her heroism as I was about yours.”

Since I’d never been confident about my own heroism, Sam’s comment didn’t ease my mind.

“How’s your eye?”

She touched the bruise. “It’s nothing. Alex just freaked out. It took me a while to understand, but when you take someone’s hand and lead them to Valhalla, you get a glimpse into their soul.”

“Did that happen when you took me?”

“With you, there wasn’t much to see. It’s very dark in there.”

“Good one!” Jack said.

“Is there a rune that would make both of you shut up?” I asked.

“Anyway,” Sam continued, “Alex was angry and scared. After I dropped her off, I started to realize why. She’s gender fluid. She thought that if she

became an einherji, she'd be stuck in one gender forever. She *really* hated that idea."

"Ah," I said, which was short for *I get it, but I don't really get it.*

I'd been stuck in one gender my whole life. It never bothered me. Now I wondered how that would feel for Alex. The only analogy I could come up with wasn't a very good one. My second grade teacher, Miss Mengler (aka Miss Mangler), had forced me to write with my right hand even though I was left-handed. She'd actually taped my left hand to the desk. My mom had exploded when she found out, but I still remembered the panicky feeling of being restrained, forced to write in such an unnatural way because Miss Mengler had insisted, *This is the normal way, Magnus. Stop complaining. You'll get used to it.*

Sam let out a sigh. "I admit I don't have much experience with—"

Jack leaped to attention in my hand. "Argrs? Oh, they're great! One time me and Frey—"

"Jack..." I said.

His runes changed to a subdued magenta. "Fine, I'll just sit here like an *inanimate object.*"

That actually got a laugh out of Sam. She had uncovered her hair, as she often did in Valhalla. She'd told me that she considered the hotel her second home, and the einherjar and Valkyries part of her family, so she didn't feel the need to wear the hijab here. Her dark locks spilled around her shoulders, and her green silk scarf hung around her neck, shimmering as it tried to activate its magical camouflage. This was a little unsettling, since every once in a while Sam's shoulders and neck seemed to disappear.

"Does Alex Fierro bother you?" I asked. "I mean...her being transgender? Like, with you being religious and all?"

Sam arched an eyebrow. "Being 'religious and all,' a lot of things bother me about this place." She gestured around us. "I had to do some soul-searching when I first realized my dad was...you know, *Loki.* I still don't accept the idea that the Norse gods are *gods.* They're just powerful beings. Some of them are my annoying relatives. But they are no more than creations of Allah, the *only* god, just like you and I are."

"You remember I'm an atheist, right?"

She snorted. "Sounds like the beginning of a joke, doesn't it? *An atheist and a Muslim walk into a pagan afterlife.* Anyway, Alex being transgender

is the least of my problems. I'm more worried about her...connection to our father."

Sam traced the life line on her palm. "Alex changes shape so often. She doesn't realize how dangerous it is to rely on Loki's power. You can't give him any more of a hold than he already has."

I frowned. Samirah had told me something like this before—how she didn't like to shape-shift because she didn't want to become like her dad—but I didn't understand it. Personally, if I could shape-shift, I'd be turning into a polar bear, like, every two minutes and scaring the Saehrimnir out of people.

"What kind of *hold* are we talking about?"

She wouldn't meet my eyes. "Forget it. You didn't fly after me to talk about Alex Fierro, did you?"

"True." I described what had happened on the battlefield—the dragon, and the way Loki had invaded my head wearing an offensive tuxedo and invited me to a wedding. Then I told her about my dreams and how apparently this marriage just happened to be Sam's, to some bar-owning, walrus-voiced giant named Thrym who served the worst-smelling pickles in Jotunheim.

Some of this Jack hadn't heard yet, either. Despite his promise to remain inanimate, he gasped and cried "You're kidding me!" at all the appropriate spots and some of the inappropriate ones.

When I was done, Sam stayed quiet. A waft of cold passed between us like a Freon leak from an AC.

Down below, the cleaning crew had moved in. Ravens picked up the plates and cups. Bands of wolves ate the leftover food and licked the floor clean. We were all about hygiene here in Valhalla.

"I wanted to tell you," Sam said at last. "It all happened so quickly. It just...came crashing down on me."

She wiped a tear from her cheek. I'd never seen Sam cry. I wanted to console her—give her a hug, pat her hand or something, but Sam didn't do physical contact, even if I was part of her extended Valhalla family.

"That's how Loki is messing with your personal life," I guessed. "He came to see your grandparents? Amir?"

"He gave them *invitations*." Sam dug one from her pocket and handed it across: gold cursive on green card stock, just like the one Loki had tucked into Uncle Randolph's pocket.

*The incomparable Loki and some other people invite you  
to celebrate with them the marriage of*

***Samirah Al-Abbas Bint Loki  
and***

***Thrym, Son of Thrym, Son of Thrym***

WHEN:

***Five Days Hence***

WHERE:

***We'll Get Back to You***

WHY:

***Because It's Better than Doomsday***

***Gifts Are Welcome***

***Dancing and Wild Pagan Sacrifices to Follow***

I looked up. “Wild pagan sacrifices?”

“You can imagine how that went over with my grandparents.”

I studied the invitation again. The *when* section shimmered, the *five* slowly fading, turning into a *four*. The *where* section also had a holographic sheen, as if it might eventually change to a specific address. “Couldn’t you tell your grandparents this was a prank?”

“Not when my father delivered it personally.”

“Oh.”

I pictured Loki sitting at the al-Abbases’ dining table, sipping tea from one of their lovely gold cups. I imagined Jid’s Santa Claus face getting redder and redder, Bibi doing her best to keep her regal poise while angry steam spewed from the edges of her hijab.

“Loki told them everything,” Sam said. “How he met my mom, how I became a Valkyrie, *everything*. He told them they had no right to arrange a marriage for me because he was my dad and he had already arranged one.”

Jack quivered in my hand. “On the bright side,” he said, “that’s a very nice invitation.”

“Jack...” I said.

“Right. Inanimate.”

“Please tell me your grandparents were not okay with that,” I said. “They don’t expect you to marry a giant.”

“They don’t know *what* to think.” Sam took back the invitation. She stared at it as if hoping it would burst into flames. “They’d had their suspicions about my mother’s relationship. Like I told you, my family has

been interacting with the Norse gods for generations. The gods have this... this *attraction* to my clan.”

“Welcome to the club,” I muttered.

“But Jid and Bibi had no idea of the extent of it until Loki showed up and sent them reeling. What hurt them most was that I’d kept my life as a Valkyrie from them.” Another tear traced the base of her nose. “And Amir...”

“The video we saw on Valkyrie Vision,” I guessed. “He and his father came over this morning, and you tried to explain.”

She nodded, picking at the corner of the invitation. “Mr. Fadlan doesn’t understand what’s going on, just that there’s a disagreement of some kind. But Amir...we talked again this afternoon, and I—I told him the truth. All of it. And I promised that I would *never* agree to this crazy marriage with Thrym. But I don’t know if Amir can even *hear* me at this point. He must think I’m out of my mind....”

“We’ll figure it out,” I promised. “There’s no way you are going to be forced to marry a giant.”

“You don’t know Loki like I do, Magnus. He can burn down my whole life. He’s already started. He has ways of...” She faltered. “The point is, he’s decided that *he* is the only one who can negotiate for Thor’s hammer. I can’t imagine what he wants out of the deal, but it can’t be good. The only way to stop him is to find the hammer first.”

“Then we’ll do that,” I said. “We know this guy Thrym has it. Let’s go get it. Or even better, just tell Thor and make him do it.”

Across my knees, Jack hummed and glowed. “It won’t be that easy, *señor*. Even if you could find Thrym’s fortress, he wouldn’t be stupid enough to keep Thor’s hammer there. He’s an earth giant. He could have buried it literally anywhere under the earth.”

“The wight’s barrow,” Sam said.

“In Provincetown,” I said. “You still think that’s our best bet? Even with this goat-killer stalking us, telling us it’s a trap?”

Sam stared right through me. She seemed to be watching the horizon, imagining a mushroom cloud rising from the nuke Loki had dropped on her future. “I have to try, Magnus. The wight’s tomb. First thing in the morning.”

I hated this idea. Unfortunately, I didn’t have a better one.

“Fine. You contacted Hearth and Blitz?”

“They’re meeting us on Cape Cod.” She rose and crumpled up the wedding invitation. Before I could object that we might need it, she tossed it to the ravens and wolves. “Meet you after breakfast. And bring a coat. It’ll be a chilly morning to fly.”



## Relax, It's Just a Little Death Prophecy

SURE ENOUGH, once Jack became a pendant again, I passed out for twelve hours.

In the morning, I woke with sore arms and legs, feeling like I'd spent the whole night flapping through the air with an einherji hanging from my ankle.

Alex Fierro was conspicuously absent from breakfast, though T.J. assured me he'd slipped a note under her door explaining where the lounge was for floor nineteen.

“She’s probably still asleep,” T.J. said. “She had a big first day.”

“Unless she’s that mosquito right there.” Halfborn pointed to an insect crawling across the saltshaker. “That you, Fierro?”

The mosquito said nothing.

My friends promised to stay on high alert, ready to do whatever was needed to help stop Loki from holding his shotgun wedding in five (now four) days.

“We’ll also keep an eye on Fierro,” Mallory promised, scowling at the mosquito.

I just had time to scarf down a bagel before Sam arrived and led me to the stables above the floor 422 exercise room.

Whenever Sam said, “We’re going to fly,” I couldn’t be sure what she meant.

Valkyries were perfectly capable of flying on their own. They were strong enough to carry at least one other person, so maybe she intended to

put me in a large tote bag and schlep me to Cape Cod.

Or she might have meant *fly* as in *we're going to tumble off a cliff and plummet to our deaths*. We seemed to spend a lot of time doing that.

Today, she meant riding a flying horse. I wasn't clear on why Valkyries *had* flying horses. Probably just because they looked cool. Besides, nobody wanted to ride into battle on a lindworm, flapping and bouncing around like a turkey-snake cowboy.

Sam saddled a white stallion. She climbed on his back and pulled me up behind her, then we galloped out the gates of the stable, straight into the skies above Boston.

She was right about the cold. That didn't bother me, but the winds were strong, and Sam's hijab kept fluttering into my mouth. Since hijabs represented modesty and piety, I doubted Sam wanted hers to look like I'd been chewing on it.

"How much farther?" I asked.

She glanced back. The bruise under her eye had faded, but she still seemed distracted and exhausted. I wondered if she'd slept at all.

"Not long now," she said. "Hang on."

I'd flown with Sam enough times to take that warning seriously. I clenched my knees against the horse's rib cage and wrapped my hands around Sam's waist. As we plunged straight through the clouds, I may have screamed "Meinfretr!"

My butt went weightless in the saddle. FYI, I do not like having a weightless butt. I wondered if Sam flew her airplane like this, and if so, how many flight instructors she had sent into cardiac arrest.

We broke through the clouds. In front of us, Cape Cod stretched to the horizon—a parenthesis of green and gold in a blue sea. Directly below, the northern tip of the peninsula made a gentle curlicue around Provincetown harbor. A few sailboats dotted the bay, but it was too early in the spring for many visitors.

Sam leveled us off at about five hundred feet and flew us along the coast, racing over dunes and marshes, then following the arc of Commercial Street with its gray shingled cottages and neon-painted gingerbread houses. The shops were mostly shut down, the streets empty.

"Just scouting," Sam told me.

"Making sure an army of giants isn't hiding behind the Mooncusser Tattoo Shop?"

“Or sea trolls, or wights, or my father, or—”

“Yeah, I get the idea.”

Finally, she banked us left, heading for a gray stone tower that loomed on a hill at the edge of town. The granite structure rose about two hundred and fifty feet and had a turreted top that resembled a fairy-tale castle. I had a vague memory of seeing the tower during my visit here as a kid, but my mom had been more interested in hiking the dunes and walking the beaches.

“What is that place?” I asked Sam.

“Our destination.” A faint smile tugged at her mouth. “The first time I saw it, I thought it was the minaret for a mosque. It looks sort of like one.”

“But it’s not?”

She laughed. “No. It’s a memorial for the Pilgrims. They landed here before they moved to Plymouth. Of course, Muslims have been in America for a long time, too. One of my friends at mosque? She has an ancestor, Yusuf ben Ali, who served with George Washington during the American Revolution.” She stopped herself. “Sorry, you didn’t want a history lesson. Anyway, we’re not here for the tower. We’re here for what’s underneath.”

I was afraid she wasn’t talking about the gift shop.

We flew around the monument, scanning the clearing at its base. Just outside the tower’s entrance, sitting on the stone retaining wall and swinging their feet like they were bored, were my two favorite people from alien worlds.

“Blitz!” I yelled. “Hearth!”

Hearth was deaf, so yelling his name didn’t do much good, but Blitzen nudged him and pointed us out. They both jumped off the ledge and waved enthusiastically as our horse came in for a landing.

“Kid!” Blitzen jogged toward me.

He could have been mistaken for the ghost of a tropical explorer. From the rim of his pith helmet, a screen of white gauze covered him down to his shoulders. The gauze, I knew, was custom-designed to block sunlight, which turns dwarves to stone. He’d also put on leather gloves to protect his hands. Otherwise he was wearing the same outfit I’d seen in my dream: a walnut three-piece suit with a black bow tie, snappy pointed leather shoes, and a bright orange handkerchief for flair. Just the thing for a day excursion into a tomb of the undead.

He tackled me with a hug, almost losing his pith helmet. His cologne smelled like rose petals. “Hammers and anvils, I’m glad to see you!”

Hearthstone ran up next, smiling faintly and waving both palms in the ASL gesture for *Yay!* For Hearth, this was the equivalent of ecstatic fanboy screaming.

He wore his usual black leather jacket and jeans, with his Twister-dot scarf wrapped around his neck. His face was as pale as ever, with the perpetually sad eyes and the spiky platinum hair, but he had fleshed out a bit in the past few weeks. He looked healthier, at least by human standards. Maybe they'd been ordering a lot of pizza while they hid out in Mimir's safe house.

"You guys." I pulled Hearth into a hug. "You look exactly like when I saw you in the bathroom!"

In retrospect, that was probably not the line to lead with.

I backed up and explained what had been going on—the weird dreams, the weirder reality, Loki in my head, my head in a pickle jar, Mimir's head in the bathtub, et cetera.

"Yeah," Blitzen said. "The Capo *loves* to show up in the bathtub. Almost scared me out of my chain mail pajamas one night."

"That's an image I did not need," I said. "Also, we have to have a talk about communication. You guys just disappeared on me without a *word*."

"Hey, kid, it was *his* idea." He signed this for Hearth's benefit—pinky touching the forehead, then pointing at Hearth with two fingers. *Idea. His. H* for Hearthstone's name sign.

Hearthstone grunted in irritation. He signed back: *To save you, dummy. Tell Magnus.* He made an *M* for my name sign—a fist with three fingers wrapped over his thumb.

Blitzen sighed. "The elf is overreacting, as usual. He got me all terrified and hustled me out of town. But I've calmed down now. It was just a little death prophecy!"

Sam untangled her backpack from the horse's saddlebags. She patted the horse's muzzle and pointed toward the sky, and our white stallion buddy took off for the clouds.

"Blitzen..." She turned. "You understand there's no such thing as a *little* death prophecy, right?"

"I'm fine!" Blitzen gave us a confident smile. Through the gauze netting, he looked like a slightly happier ghost. "A few weeks ago, Hearthstone got back from his one-on-one rune magic class with Odin. He was all excited to

read my future. So he cast the runes and...well, they didn't come out so good."

*Not so good?* Hearthstone stomped his foot. *Blitzen. Bloodshed. Cannot be stopped. Before O-S-T-A-R-A.*

"Right," Blitzen said. "That's what he read in the runes. But—"

"What's Ostara?" I asked.

"The first day of spring," Sam said. "Which is in, ah, four days."

"The same day as your supposed wedding."

"Believe me," she said sourly, "it wasn't my idea."

"So Blitzen is supposed to die before that?" My stomach started climbing up my throat. "Bloodshed that cannot be stopped?"

Hearthstone nodded emphatically. *He shouldn't be here.*

"I agree," I said. "It's too dangerous."

"Guys!" Blitzen tried for a hearty chuckle. "Look, Hearthstone is new at reading the future. Maybe he misinterpreted! *Bloodshed* might actually be...*toolshed*. A toolshed that cannot be stopped. That would be a *good omen!*"

Hearthstone held out his hands as if to strangle the dwarf, which needed no translation.

"Besides," Blitz said, "if there's a tomb here, it'll be underground. You need a dwarf!"

Hearth launched into a flurry of angry signs, but Samirah stepped in.

"Blitz is right," she said, signing the message with a hot-potato fist bump, both index fingers extended. She'd gotten good at ASL since meeting Hearthstone—just, you know, in her spare time between gathering souls, making honor roll, and flying jet planes.

"This is too important," she said. "I wouldn't ask you otherwise. We have to find Thor's hammer before the first of spring, or entire worlds will be destroyed. Or...I'll have to marry a giant."

*Another way,* Hearth signed. *Must be one. Don't even know hammer is here.*

"Buddy." Blitz took the elf's hands, which was kind of sweet but also kind of rude, because it was the ASL equivalent of putting a gag on someone's mouth. "I know you're worried, but it'll be fine."

Blitz turned toward me. "Besides, as much as I love this elf, I'm going crazy in that safe house. I'd rather die out here, being useful to my friends, than keep on watching TV and eating delivery pizza and waiting for Mimir's

head to pop up in the bathtub. Also, Hearthstone snores like you wouldn't believe."

Hearth yanked his hands back. *You're not signing, but I can read lips, remember?*

"Hearth," Sam said. "Please."

Sam and Hearth had a staring contest so intense I could feel ice crystals forming in the air. I'd never seen those two so much at odds before, and I did *not* want to be in the middle. I was tempted to summon Jack and have him sing a Beyoncé song just to give them a common enemy.

At last Hearthstone signed: *If anything happens to him...*

*I take responsibility*, Sam mouthed.

"I can read lips, too," Blitzen said. "And I can take responsibility for myself." He rubbed his hands together eagerly. "Now, let's find the entrance to this barrow, eh? It's been months since I unearthed a malicious undead power!"



## FOURTEEN

# Cry Me a Blood River. Wait. Actually, Don't

JUST LIKE the good old days: marching together into the unknown, searching for missing magical weapons, and risking painful death. I'd missed my buddies!

We walked halfway around the base of the tower before Blitzen said "Aha."

He knelt and ran his gloved fingertips along a crack in the paving stones. To me, it didn't look any different from the thousands of other cracks in the stone, but Blitzen seemed to like this one.

He grinned up at me. "Now you see, kid? You *never* would've found this without a dwarf. You would've walked around forever, looking for the entrance to the tomb, and—"

"That crack is the entrance?"

"It's the *trigger* for the entrance, yeah. But we'll still need some magic to get in. Hearth, double-check this for me, will you?"

Hearth crouched next to him. He nodded like, *Yep*, then traced a rune on the floor with his finger. Immediately, a ten-foot-square section of pavement vaporized, revealing a shaft that plunged straight down. Unfortunately, the four of us happened to be *on* that ten-foot square when it vaporized.

We dropped into the darkness with a fair amount of screaming, most of which was mine.

Good news: When I landed, I didn't break any bones. Bad news: Hearthstone did.

I heard a wet *snap*, followed by Hearth's grunt, and I knew immediately what had happened.

I'm not saying elves are fragile. In some ways, Hearth was the toughest guy I knew. But on occasion, I wanted to wrap him in blankets and slap a "handle with care" sticker on his forehead.

"Hold on, man," I told him, which was useless, since he couldn't see me in the dark. I found his leg and quickly located the break. Hearth gasped and tried to claw the skin off my hands.

"What's going on?" Blitz demanded. "Whose elbow is this?"

"That's me," Sam said. "Everyone okay?"

"Hearth has a broken ankle," I said. "I need to fix it. You two keep watch."

"It's totally dark!" Blitz complained.

"You're a dwarf." Sam slipped her ax from her belt, a sound I knew well. "I thought you thrived underground."

"I do!" said Blitz. "Preferably in a well-lit and tastefully decorated underground."

Judging from the echo of our voices, we were in a large stone chamber. There was no light, so I assumed the shaft we'd fallen through had closed above us.

In the plus column, nothing had attacked us...yet.

I found Hearth's hand and made sign letters against his palm so he wouldn't panic: *HEAL YOU. BE STILL.*

Then I put both my hands on his broken ankle.

I called on the power of Frey. Warmth blossomed in my chest and spread down my arms. My fingers glowed with a soft golden light, pushing back the darkness. I could feel the bones in Hearthstone's ankle knitting together, the swelling subsiding, his circulation returning to normal.

He let out a long sigh and signed, *Thanks.*

I squeezed his knee. "No problem, man."

"So, Magnus," Blitz said, his voice hoarse, "you might want to look around."

One side effect of my healing power was that I temporarily glowed. I don't mean I looked healthy. I mean I actually *glowed*. In the daytime it was hardly noticeable, but here, in a dark subterranean chamber, I looked like a human night-light. Sadly, that meant I could now see our surroundings.

We were in the middle of a domed chamber, like a giant beehive carved from rock. The apex of the ceiling, about twenty feet up, showed no sign of the hatch through which we'd fallen. All around the circumference of the walls, in closet-size niches, stood mummified men in rotted clothing, their leathery fingers clasped around the hilts of corroded swords. I saw no exit from the room.

"Well, this is perfect," I said. "They're going to wake up, aren't they? Those ten guys—"

"Twelve," Sam corrected.

"Twelve guys with big swords," I said.

My hand closed around my runestone pendant. Either Jack was trembling, or I was. I decided it must be Jack.

"They could just be terrifying inanimate corpses," Blitz said. "Think positive."

Hearthstone snapped his fingers for attention. He pointed to the sarcophagus that stood upright in the center of the room.

It's not that I hadn't noticed it. The big iron box was hard to miss. But I'd been trying to ignore it, hoping it would go away. The front was carved with ornate Viking images—wolves, serpents, and runic inscriptions swirling around a central picture of a bearded man with a big sword.

I had no idea what a coffin like this was doing on Cape Cod. I was pretty sure the Pilgrims hadn't brought it over on the *Mayflower*.

Sam motioned for us to stay put. She levitated off the floor and floated around the sarcophagus, her ax ready.

"Inscriptions on the back, too," she reported. "This sarcophagus is *old*. I don't see any sign that it's been opened recently, but perhaps Thrym hid the hammer inside."

"Here's an idea," Blitzen said. "Let's not check."

I glanced at him. "That's your expert opinion?"

"Look, kid, this tomb *reeks* of ancient power. It was built well over a thousand years ago, long before Viking explorers got to North America."

"How can you tell?"

"The marks on the rock," Blitzen said. "I can tell when a chamber was hewn as easily as I can gauge the age of a shirt by the wear of the threads."

That didn't sound very easy to me. Then again, I didn't have a degree in dwarven fashion design.

"So it's a Viking tomb built before the Vikings got here," I said. "Uh... how is that possible?"

*It moved*, Hearth signed.

"How can a tomb move?"

Blitzen took off his pith helmet. The gauze netting left a cowlick across his otherwise perfect hair. "Kid, stuff moves in the Nine Worlds all the time. We're connected by the World Tree, right? The branches sway. New branches grow. Roots deepen. This place has shifted from wherever it was originally built. Probably because...you know, it's imbued with evil magic."

Sam touched down next to us. "Not a fan of evil magic."

Hearth pointed to the floor in front of the sarcophagus. I hadn't noticed before, but all around the base of the coffin, a faint circle of runes was etched in the stone.

Hearth finger-spelled: *K-E-N-N-I-N-G*.

"What's that?" I asked.

Samirah edged a little closer to the inscription. "A kenning is a Viking nickname."

"You, mean like... 'Hey, Kenning. How's it going?'"

"No," Sam said, in that I-am-going-to-hit-you-with-the-stupid-stick tone. "It's a way of referring to somebody with a description instead of their name. Like instead of Blitzen, I might say *Clever-of-clothes*, or for Hearthstone, *Rune-lord*."

Hearth nodded. *You may call me Rune-lord*.

Sam squinted at the inscription on the floor. "Magnus, could you glow a little closer please?"

"I'm not your flashlight." But I stepped toward the coffin.

"It says *Blood River*," Sam announced. "Over and over, all the way around."

"You can read Old Norse?" I asked.

"Old Norse is easy. You want difficult? Try learning Arabic."

"Blood River." My bagel breakfast sat heavy in my gut. "Does this remind anybody of *bloodshed that cannot be stopped*? I don't like it."

Even without his gauze netting, Blitz looked a little gray. "It's...probably a coincidence. However, I would like to point out there are no exits from this room. My dwarven senses tell me these walls are solid all the way around. We've walked into a loaded trap. The only way out is to spring it."

"I'm starting to dislike your dwarven senses," I said.

“You and me both, kid.”

Hearthstone glared at Blitzen. *You wanted to come here. What now? Break kenning circle. Open coffin?*

Sam readjusted her hijab. “If there’s a wight in this tomb, it’ll be in that sarcophagus. It’s also the most secure place to hide a magical weapon, like a god’s hammer.”

“I need a second opinion.” I pulled off my pendant.

Jack sprang to full length in my hand. “Hey, guys! Ooh, a tomb imbued with evil magic? Cool!”

“Buddy, can you sense Thor’s hammer anywhere around here?”

Jack vibrated with concentration. “Hard to be sure. There’s *something* powerful in that box. A weapon? A magical weapon? Can we open it? Please, please? This is exciting!”

I resisted the urge to smack him upside the hilt, which would have only hurt me. “You ever heard of an earth giant working with a wight? Like... using its tomb as a safe-deposit box?”

“That would be strange,” Jack admitted. “Usually an earth giant just buries his stuff in...you know, the earth. Like, *deep* in the earth.”

I turned to Sam. “So why would Otis send us here? And how is this a good idea?”

Sam glanced around the chamber like she was trying to decide which of the twelve mummies to hide behind. “Look, maybe Otis was wrong. Maybe —maybe this was a wild-goose chase, but—”

“But we’re here now!” Jack said. “Aw, c’mon, guys. I’ll protect you! Besides, I can’t stand an unopened present. At least let me shake the coffin to guess what’s inside!”

Hearthstone made a chopping motion against his palm. *Enough already.*

From the inside pocket of his jacket, he produced a small leather pouch —his collection of runestones. He pulled out one I’d seen before:



“That’s *dagaz*,” I said. “We use that for opening doors in Valhalla. Are you sure—?”

Hearth's expression stopped me. He didn't need sign language to convey how he felt. He regretted this whole situation. He hated putting Blitzen in danger. But we were here now. We'd brought him along because he knew magic. He wanted to get this over with.

"Magnus," Sam said, "you might want to step back."

I did, positioning myself in front of Blitzen, just in case Blood River sprang out of the coffin samurai-style and went directly for the nearest dwarf.

Hearth knelt. He touched dagaz to the inscription. Instantly, the Blood River kenning ignited like a ring of gunpowder. Hearth backed away as the sarcophagus's iron lid blew right off, hurtling past me and slamming into the wall. Before us stood a mummified king in a silver crown and silver armor, with a sheathed sword clasped in his hands.

"Wait for it," I muttered.

Naturally, the corpse opened his eyes.



FIFTEEN

## All in Favor of Slaughtering Magnus, Please Say Aye

WITH MOST zombies, you don't expect conversation.

I figured King Mummy would say *RARRRR!* Or, at most, *BRAINS!* And then get down to the business of killing us.

I was not ready for "Thank you, mortals! I am in your debt!"

He stepped out of his coffin—a little unsteadily, since he was an emaciated corpse whose armor probably weighed more than he did—and did a tap dance of glee.

"A thousand years in that stupid box, and now I'm free!  
HAHAHAHAHA!"

Behind him, the inner walls of his coffin were scored with hundreds of marks where he'd been keeping track of years. There was no sign of Thor's hammer, though, which meant the zombie had been locked in there without a decent way to stream Netflix.

Jack quivered with excitement. "Will you look at that sword? She's so hot!"

I did not know 1) how he could tell the sword was female, or 2) how he could tell she was hot. I was not sure I wanted answers to those questions.

Sam, Blitz, and Hearth edged away from the zombie. Jack's point floated toward the lady sword, but I forced him to the floor and leaned on him. I didn't want him to offend Mr. Zombie or his blade by being too forward.

"Uh, hi," I told the zombie. "I'm Magnus."

"You have a lovely golden glow!"

“Thanks. So how is it that you’re speaking English?”

“Am I?” The king tilted his ghoulish head. Wisps of white clung to his chin—maybe cobwebs or the remnants of a beard. His eyes were green and bright and entirely human. “Perhaps it’s magic. Perhaps we are communicating on a spiritual level. Whatever the case, thank you for releasing me. I am Gellir, prince of the Danes!”

Blitzen peeked out from behind me. “Gellir? Is Blood River your nickname?”

Gellir’s laugh sounded like a maraca filled with wet sand. “No, my dwarven friend. Blood River is a kenning I earned from my *blade*, the Skofnung Sword.”

*Clunk, clunk.*

Hearth had backed into the coffin lid and fallen over it. He stayed in crab-walk position, his eyes wide with shock.

“Ah!” Gellir said. “I see your elf has heard of my sword.”

Jack lurched under my elbow. “Uh, *señor*? I’ve heard of her, too. She’s like...wow. She’s *famous*.”

“Wait,” Sam said. “Prince Gellir, is there possibly a—a hammer around here somewhere? We heard you might have a hammer.”

The zombie frowned, which caused fault lines to open on his leathery face. “A hammer? No. Why would I want a hammer when I am the Lord of the Sword?”

Sam’s eyes dimmed, or maybe that was just my glow starting to fade.

“You’re sure?” I asked. “I mean, the Lord of the Sword is great. But you could also be, I don’t know, the Slammer of the Hammer.”

Gellir kept his gaze on Sam. His frowned deepened. “One moment. Are you a woman?”

“Uh...yes, Prince Gellir. My name is Samirah al-Abbas.”

“We call her the Max with the Ax,” I offered.

“I will hurt you,” Sam hissed at me.

“A woman.” Gellir tugged at his chin, pulling off some of his cobweb whiskers. “That’s a shame. I can’t unsheathe my sword in the presence of a woman.”

“Oh, what a bummer,” Jack said. “I want to meet Skoffy!”

Hearthstone struggled to his feet. He signed: *We should leave. Now. Not let zombie draw sword.*

“What is your elf doing?” Gellir asked. “Why does he make those strange gestures?”

“It’s sign language,” I said. “He, uh, doesn’t want you to draw your sword. He says we should leave.”

“But I can’t allow that! I must show my gratitude! Also, I need to kill you!”

My glow was definitely fading now. When Jack spoke, his runes lit the tomb in ominous red flashes. “Hey, zombie guy? Gratitude is usually more like sending a nice card, and less like *I need to kill you.*”

“Oh, I’m very grateful!” Gellir protested. “But I’m also a *draugr*, the chief wight of this barrow. You are trespassing. So, after I finish thanking you properly, I’ll have to consume your flesh and devour your souls. But, alas, the Skofnung Sword has very clear restrictions. It cannot be drawn in daylight or in the presence of a woman.”

“Those are stupid rules,” Sam said. “I mean, those are very *sensible* rules. So, you can’t kill us?”

“No,” Gellir allowed. “But don’t worry. I can still *have* you killed!”

He rapped the sheath of his sword three times against the floor. To absolutely no one’s surprise, the twelve mummified warriors stepped out from their niches along the walls.

The draugr had zero respect for zombie clichés. They did not shamble. They didn’t moan incoherently or act dazed like proper zombies should. They drew their weapons in perfect unison and stood ready for Gellir’s order to kill.

“This is bad,” said Jack, master of the obvious. “I’m not sure I can take out this many before they kill you guys. And I don’t want to look incompetent in front of that hot lady sword!”

“Priorities, Jack,” I said.

“Exactly! I hope you’ve got a plan that makes me look good!”

Sam gave us a new light source. In her free hand, a glowing spear appeared—the field weapon of a Valkyrie. Its harsh white light made the zombies’ faces start to steam.

Hearthstone hefted his pouch of runestones. Blitzen whipped off his bow tie—which, like his entire line of spring fashion, was lined with ultra-flexible chain mail. He wrapped the tie around his fist, ready to smash some zombie faces.

I didn't like our odds: four against thirteen. Or five, if you included Jack as a separate person. I didn't, because that meant I would have to pull my own weight.

I wondered if I could invoke the Peace of Frey. Thanks to my dad, a pacifist-type god who didn't allow fighting in his sacred places, I could sometimes disarm everyone in a wide circle around me, blasting their weapons right out of their hands. That was kind of my finishing trick, though. I would look really dumb if I tried it now in this enclosed space and the zombies just picked up their swords again and killed us.

Before I could decide what would be most impressive to a hot lady sword, one of the zombies raised his hand. "Do we have a quorum?"

Prince Gellir slumped as though one of his vertebrae had disintegrated.

"Arvid," he said, "we've been locked in this chamber for centuries. Of course we have a quorum! We're all present because we can't leave!"

"Then I move that we call this meeting to order," said another dead man.

"Oh, for the love of Thor!" Gellir complained. "We're here to massacre these mortals, feed on their flesh, and take their souls. That's *obvious*. Then we'll have enough strength to break free of our tomb and wreak havoc upon Cape Cod. Do we really need—?"

"I second," called another zombie.

Gellir smacked his own skeletal forehead. "Fine! All in favor?"

The twelve other dead guys raised their hands.

"Then this massacre, er, meeting is called to order." Gellir turned to me, his eyes gleaming with irritation. "My apologies, but we vote on everything in this group. It's the tradition of the Thing."

"What thing?"

"You know, the Thing," Gellir said. "From the word *thingvellir*, meaning *field of the assembly*. The Norse voting council."

"Ah." Sam wavered between her ax hand and her spear hand, as if unsure which to use...or whether that decision would require a new motion. "I've heard of the Thing. It was a site where ancient Norse met to settle legal disputes and make political decisions. The meetings inspired the idea of Parliament."

"Yes, yes," Gellir said. "Now, the *English* Parliament—that wasn't my fault personally. But when the Pilgrims came along—" He pointed his chin toward the ceiling. "Well, by that time, our tomb had been here for centuries. The Pilgrims landed, camped out over us for a few weeks. They must have

subconsciously felt our presence. I'm afraid we inspired the Mayflower Compact, started all that business about rights and democracy in America, blah, blah, blah."

"May I take the minutes?" asked a zombie.

Gellir sighed. "Dagfinn, honestly...Fine, you're secretary."

"I love being secretary." Dagfinn stuck his sword back in its sheath. He pulled a notepad and a pen from his belt, though what a Viking corpse was doing with school supplies I couldn't tell you.

"So...wait," Sam said. "If you've been stuck in that box, how do you know what was going on outside the tomb?"

Gellir rolled his lovely green eyes. "Telepathic powers. *Duh*. Anyway, ever since we inspired the Pilgrims, my twelve bodyguards have been insufferably proud of themselves. We have to do *everything* by parliamentary rules...or Thing-a-mentary rules. Not to worry, though. We'll kill you soon enough. Now, I make a motion—"

"First," another zombie interrupted, "is there any old business?"

Gellir made a fist so tight I thought his hand would crumble. "Knut, we are draugr from the sixth century. For us, *everything* is old business!"

"I move that we read the minutes from the last meeting," said Arvid. "Do I hear a second?"

Hearthstone raised two fingers. I didn't blame him. The more time they spent reading the minutes of past massacres, the less time they'd have for killing us in a future one.

Dagfinn flipped back in his notebook. The pages turned to dust in his fingers. "Ah, actually, I don't have those minutes."

"Well, then!" Gellir said. "Moving right along—"

"Wait!" Blitzen cried. "We need an oral accounting! I want to hear about your pasts—who you are, why you were all buried together, and the names and histories of all your weapons. I'm a dwarf. The heritage of things is important to me, especially if those things are going to kill me. I motion that you tell us everything."

"I second the motion," Samirah said. "All in favor?"

Every zombie raised his hand, including Gellir—I guess out of habit—who then looked quite annoyed with himself. Jack shot into the air to make the vote unanimous.

Gellir shrugged, causing his armor and bones to creak. "You're making this massacre very difficult, but all right, I will recount our story. Gentlemen,

at ease.”

The other zombies sheathed their swords. Some sat on the floor. Others leaned against the wall and crossed their arms. Arvid and Knut retrieved bags of yarn and knitting needles from their niches and began to work on mittens.

“So I am Gellir,” began the prince, “son of Thorkel, a prince among the Danes. And this”—he patted his sword—“is Skofnung, the most famous blade ever wielded by a Viking!”

“Present company excepted,” Jack murmured. “But, oh, *man*, Skofnung is a *hot* name.”

I didn’t agree with him. I also didn’t like the look of terror on Hearthstone’s face. “Hearth, you know this sword?”

The elf signed cautiously, as if the air might burn his fingers. *First belonged to King H-R-O-L-F. Was forged with souls of his twelve followers, all berserkers.*

“What is he saying?” Gellir demanded. “Those hand gestures are very annoying.”

I started to translate, but Blitzen interrupted, shrieking so loudly that Arvid and Knut dropped their knitting needles.

“*That* sword?” Blitz stared at Hearthstone. “The one with...the stone...your house?”

This made no sense to me, but Hearth nodded.

*Now you see?* he signed. *We should not have come.*

Sam turned, her spear’s light making dust sizzle on the floor. “What do mean? What stone? And what does it have to do with Thor’s hammer?”

“Excuse me,” Gellir said. “I believe I was speaking. If you came here looking for Thor’s hammer, I’m afraid someone gave you very bad information.”

“We have to live through this,” I told my friends. “There’s a goat I need to kill.”

“Ahem,” Gellir continued. “As I was saying, the Skofnung Sword was created by a king named Hrolf. His twelve berserkers sacrificed their lives so their souls could instill the blade with power.” Gellir scowled at his own men, two of whom were now playing cards in the corner. “Those were the days when a prince could find *good* bodyguards. At any rate, a man named Eid stole the sword from Hrolf’s grave. Eid lent it to my father, Thorkel, who sort of...forgot to return it. My dad died in a shipwreck, but the sword

washed ashore in Iceland. I found it and used it in many glorious massacres. And now...here we are! When I died in battle, the sword was buried with me, along with my twelve berserkers, for protection."

Dagfinn flipped a page in his notebook and jotted. "*For...protection.* Can I add that we expected to go to Valhalla? That we were cursed to stay in this tomb forever because your sword was stolen property? And that we hate our afterlives?"

"NO!" Gellir snapped. "How many times do you want me to apologize?"

Arvid looked up from his half-finished mittens. "I move that Gellir apologize a million more times. Do I hear a second?"

"Stop that!" Gellir said. "Look, we have guests. Let's not air our dirty under-tunics, eh? Besides, once we kill these mortals and devour their souls, we'll have enough power to break out of this tomb! I can't *wait* to check out Provincetown."

I imagined thirteen zombie Vikings marching down Commercial Street, barging into the Wired Puppy Coffee Shop and demanding espresso drinks at sword point.

"But enough old business!" Gellir said. "Can I *please* introduce a motion to kill these intruders?"

"I second." Dagfinn shook his ballpoint pen. "I'm out of ink anyway."

"No!" Blitzen said. "We need more discussion. I don't know the names of these other weapons. And those knitting needles! Tell me about them!"

"You're out of order," Gellir said.

"I move that we be shown the nearest exit," I said.

Gellir stomped his foot. "You're also out of order! I call for a vote!"

Dagfinn looked at me apologetically. "It's a Thing thing. You wouldn't understand."

I should have attacked immediately, while they were off guard, but that seemed undemocratic.

"All in favor?" Gellir called.

"Aye!" the dead Vikings cried in unison. They got to their feet, put away their cards and various knitting projects, and drew their swords once again.



## SIXTEEN

# Hearthstone Unleashes His Inner Bovine

JACK DECIDED this was an excellent time to give me a training session.

Despite being fully capable of fighting on his own, he had this strong belief that I should learn to wield him with my own power. Something about me being worthy and competent or whatever. The thing is, I sucked at swordplay. Also, Jack always decided to train me in the *worst* possible situations.

“No time like the present!” he yelled, turning heavy and unhelpful in my grip.

“Come on, man!” I ducked the first blade that swung toward my head.  
“Let’s practice later, on mannequins or something!”

“Dodge left!” Jack yelled. “Your other left! Make me proud, *señor*. The Skofnung blade is watching!”

I was almost tempted to die just to embarrass Jack in front of the lady sword. But since I was outside Valhalla and my death would be permanent, I decided that particular plan might be shortsighted.

The zombies crowded in.

The cramped quarters were our only advantage. Each draugr was armed with a broadsword, which requires about five feet of free space for effective swinging. Twelve dead berserkers with broadswords, surrounding a tight-knit group of defenders in a small chamber? I don’t care how good you are at forming a quorum, you’re just not going to be able to massacre those defenders very easily without hacking apart your comrades as well.

Our melee turned into an awkward shuffle with a lot of shoving, cursing, and bad zombie breath. Samirah thrust her spear under Arvid's jaw. The weapon's light burned away his head like a flame going through toilet paper.

Another zombie jabbed at Blitzen's chest, but Blitz's chain-mail-lined vest bent the blade. Blitz slammed his bow tie-wrapped fist into the zombie's gut and—much to everyone's disgust—got his hand stuck in the zombie's abdominal cavity.

"Gross!" Blitzen proceeded to lurch backward, yanking the zombie along, swinging him like a clumsy dance partner and knocking other draugr out of the way.

Hearthstone took the award for Most Improved in Melee Combat. He slammed down a runestone:



He was immediately encased in golden light. He grew taller. His muscles swelled as though someone were inflating his clothes. His eyes turned bloodshot. His hair splayed with static. He grabbed the nearest zombie and tossed him across the room. Then he picked up another one and literally broke him in half over his knee.

As you can guess, the other zombies backed away from the crazy overinflated elf.

"What rune is *that*?" I accidentally swung Jack through the top of Gellir's sarcophagus, giving it a sunroof.

Blitz yanked his hand free from his dance partner, who collapsed into pieces. "Uruz," Blitz said. "The rune of the ox."

I silently added an uruz rune to my Christmas wish list.

Meanwhile, Samirah cut through her enemies, twirling her spear in one hand like a shiny baton of death. Any zombie who managed to avoid going up in flames, she chopped down with her ax.

Jack continued shouting unhelpful advice. "Parry, Magnus! Duck! Defense Pattern Omega!"

I was pretty sure that wasn't even a thing. The few times I managed to hit a zombie, Jack cut him to pieces, but I doubted the moves were impressive enough to win Jack a date with the lady sword.

When it became clear that Gellir was running out of bodyguards, he leaped into battle himself, whacking me with his sheathed sword and yelling, “Bad mortal! Bad mortal!”

I tried to fight back, but Jack resisted. Probably he thought it would be unchivalrous to fight a lady, especially one who was stuck in her sheath. Jack was old-fashioned that way.

Finally, Gellir was the only draugr left. His bodyguards lay strewn across the floor in a ghastly collection of arms, legs, weapons, and knitting supplies.

Gellir backed toward his sarcophagus, cradling the Skofnung Sword against his chest.

“Hold on. Point of order. I move that we table all further combat until—”

Hearthstone objected to Gellir’s motion by rushing the prince and ripping his head off. Gellir’s body toppled forward, and our ’roid-raging elf stomped him flat, kicking and scattering the desiccated remains until there was nothing left but the Skofnung Sword.

Hearthstone started to kick that, too.

“Stop him!” Jack yelled.

I grabbed Hearth’s arm, which was definitely the bravest thing I’d done that day. He rounded on me, his eyes blazing with fury.

*He’s dead, I signed. You can stop now.*

Chances were high that I was going to get decapitated again.

Then Hearthstone blinked. His bloodshot eyes cleared. His muscles deflated. His hair settled against his scalp. He crumpled, but Blitzen and I were both there to catch him. We’d gotten used to Hearthstone’s post-magic pass-outs.

Sam stuck her spear into Dagfinn’s corpse and left it standing up like a giant glow stick. She paced the tomb, cursing under her breath. “I’m sorry, guys. All that risk, all that effort, and no Mjolnir.”

“Hey, it’s cool,” Jack said. “We rescued the Skofnung Sword from her evil master! She’s going to be so grateful. We have to take her with us!”

Blitzen waved his orange handkerchief in Hearth’s face, trying to revive him. “Taking that sword would be a *very* bad idea.”

“Why?” I asked. “And why did Hearth look so freaked-out when he heard its name? You said something about a stone?”

Blitz cradled Hearth’s head in his lap like he was trying to protect the elf from our conversation. “Kid, whoever sent us here...it was a trap, all right.

But the draugr were the least dangerous things in this chamber. Somebody wanted us to free that sword.”

A familiar voice said, “You’re absolutely right.”

My heart jackknifed. Standing in front of Gellir’s sarcophagus were the two men I least wanted to see in the Nine Worlds: Uncle Randolph and Loki. Behind them, the back panel of the sawed-off coffin had become a shimmering doorway. On the other side lay Randolph’s study.

Loki’s scarred lips twisted into a grin. “Good job finding the bride-price, Magnus. The sword is *perfect!*”



## SEVENTEEN

# Uncle Randolph Gets on My Naughty List BIG-TIME

SAM REACTED fastest. She grabbed her spear and lunged toward her father.

“No, dear.” Loki snapped his fingers.

Instantly, Sam’s legs buckled. She collapsed sideways on the floor and lay immobile, her eyes half-closed. Her glowing spear rolled across the stones.

“Sam!” I lurched toward her, but Uncle Randolph intercepted me.

His bulk eclipsed everything. He gripped my shoulders, his breath an overwhelming combination of cloves and rotten fish.

“Don’t, Magnus.” His voice fractured with panic. “Don’t make it worse.”

“Worse?” I pushed him away.

Anger hummed through my system. Jack felt light in my hand, ready to lash out. Seeing Samirah unconscious at her father’s feet (oh, gods, I hoped she was only unconscious), I wanted to blade-smack my uncle. I wanted to go full uruz on Loki’s face.

*Give Randolph a chance,* Annabeth’s voice whispered in the back of my mind. *He’s family.*

I hesitated...just enough to notice Uncle Randolph’s condition.

His gray suit was threadbare and smeared with ashes, as though he’d been crawling through a chimney. And his face...across his nose, left cheek, and eyebrow spread a horrible crater of red-and-brown scar tissue—a barely healed burn mark in the shape of a hand.

I felt like a dwarf had punched through my abdominal cavity. I remembered the mark of Loki that had appeared on Randolph's cheek in the family photograph. I thought about my dream on the battlefield in Valhalla and recalled the searing agony on my own face when Loki had communicated with me, using Randolph as a conduit. Loki had *branded* my uncle.

I fixed my gaze on the god of trickery. He still wore the offensive green tuxedo he'd been modeling in my battlefield vision, with his paisley bow tie at a rakish angle. His eyes gleamed as if he was thinking, *Go on. Kill your uncle. This could be amusing.*

I decided not to give Loki the pleasure. "You tricked us into coming here," I growled. "Why, if you could just step through a magic doorway in a coffin?"

"Oh, but we couldn't!" Loki said. "Not until you opened the way. Once you did, well...you and Randolph are connected. Or didn't you notice?" He tapped the side of his own face. "Blood is a powerful thing. I can always find you through him."

"Unless I kill you," I said. "Randolph, get out of the way."

Loki chuckled. "You heard the boy, Randolph. Step aside."

My uncle looked like he was trying to swallow a horse pill. "Please, Loki. Don't—"

"Wow!" Loki raised his eyebrows. "It sounds like you're trying to give me an order! But that can't be right, can it? That would violate our agreement!"

The words *our agreement* made Randolph wince. He shuffled aside, his facial muscles twitching around the edges of his new scar.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Blitzen helping Hearthstone to his feet. I silently willed them to back away and stay safe. I didn't want anyone else in Loki's path.

Sam still wasn't moving.

My heart hammered against my ribs. I took a step forward. "Loki, what did you do to her?"

The god glanced down at his daughter. "Who, Samirah? She's fine. I just willed her to stop breathing."

"You what?"

Loki waved away my concern. "Not permanently, Magnus. I just like to keep a firm hand with my children. So many parents are *lackadaisical* these

days, don't you think?"

"He controls them," Randolph croaked.

Loki shot him an irritated look. "Remind me how well *you* did as a father, Randolph? Oh, that's right. Your family is *dead*, and your only hope of seeing them again is *me*."

Randolph curled inward, withering.

Loki turned back to me. His grin sent paisley patterns of *ick* crawling up my spine. "You see, Magnus, my children owe their powers to me. In exchange, they must bend to my will when I require it. It's only fair. As I said, family blood is a strong connection. It's a good thing you listened to me and left Alex in Valhalla. Otherwise we'd have two of my children unconscious!"

He rubbed his hands together. "Now, would you like to see more? Samirah's always so reluctant to shape-shift. Maybe I should force her into the shape of a cat for you. Or a wallaby? She'd make a very cute wallaby."

The paisley *ick* swirled into my stomach, threatening to erupt.

Finally I understood Samirah's reluctance to shape-shift.

*Every time I do it, she'd once told me, I feel more of my father's nature trying to take hold of me.*

No wonder Sam was afraid Loki could make her go through with the marriage to the giant. No wonder she worried about Alex Fierro, who shape-shifted without a second thought.

Did other gods have that kind of control over their children? Could Frey...? No, I wouldn't allow myself to think about that.

"Leave her alone."

Loki shrugged. "As you wish. I merely needed her out of commission. No doubt Gellir told you—the Skofnung Sword cannot be unsheathed in the presence of a woman. Fortunately, comatose women don't count! Randolph, hurry up now. This is the part where you draw the sword."

Uncle Randolph licked his lips. "Perhaps it would be better if—" His voice deteriorated into a guttural scream. He doubled over, smoke curling from the scar tissue on his cheek. My face burned in sympathy.

"Stop it!" I yelled.

My uncle gasped. He stood up, steam still rising from the side of his nose.

Loki laughed. "Randy, Randy, Randy. You look *ridiculous*. Now, we've been through this before. You want your family back from Helheim? I

require full payment in *advance*. You bear my mark, you do what I say. It's really not that hard." He pointed to the Skofnung blade. "Fetch, boy. And Magnus, if you try to interfere, I can always make Sam's coma permanent. I hope you won't, though. It would be terribly inconvenient with the wedding coming up."

I wanted to slice him down the middle like Hel. (I mean his daughter Hel, who had two different sides.) Then I wanted to glue him back together and slice him in half again. I couldn't believe I'd ever thought Loki was charismatic and silver-tongued. He'd called my uncle "Randy." That by itself required the death penalty.

But I didn't know the extent of Loki's control over Sam. Could he really make her permanently cataleptic with just a thought? I was also worried—sort of—about what might happen to Randolph. The idiot may have gotten himself into an evil bargain with Loki, but I understood why he'd done it. I remembered his wife, Catherine, on that sinking ship; Aubrey with her toy boat; Emma shrieking as she clutched her runestone *inheritance*—the symbol of all the dreams she would never grow up to realize.

To my left, Hearthstone and Blitzen edged forward. Hearthstone had recovered enough to walk on his own. Blitz held a broadsword he must have retrieved from a zombie. I put out my hand, urging them to stay back.

Randolph picked up the Skofnung Sword. He drew it slowly from its sheath—a double-edged blade of cold gray iron. Along its central ridge, runes glowed faintly in every shade of blue from permafrost to vein blood.

Jack quivered. "Oh...oh, wow."

"Yes, indeed," Loki said. "Now, if I could wield a blade, and I couldn't have the fabled Sword of Summer, I would choose the Skofnung Sword."

"Dude may be evil," Jack whispered to me, "but he has good taste."

"Unfortunately," Loki continued, "in my present state, I'm not really all here."

Blitzen grunted. "First thing he's said I agree with. That sword should never be drawn."

Loki rolled his eyes. "Blitzen, son of Freya, you're *such* a drama dwarf when it comes to magic weapons! I can't wield Skofnung, no, but the Chases are descended from the Norse kings of old! They're perfect."

I remembered Randolph telling me something about that—how the Chase family was descended from ancient Swedish royalty, blah, blah, blah.

But I'm sorry. If it qualified us to wield evil swords, I was *not* going put that on my resumé.

*Too dangerous.* Hearthstone's signing was listless and weak. His eyes brimmed with fear. *Death. The prophecy.*

"So the blade has a few quirks," said Loki. "I like quirks! It can't be used in the presence of women. It can't be drawn in daylight. It can only be used by one of noble lineage." Loki nudged Randolph's arm. "Even *this* guy qualifies. Also, once the blade is drawn, it cannot be sheathed again until it has tasted blood."

Jack buzzed with a metallic whimper. "That's not fair. That is *too* attractive."

"I know, right?" Loki said. "And the last little quirk of the sword... Hearthstone, my friend, would you like to tell them, or should I?"

Hearthstone swayed. He grabbed Blitzen's shoulder. I wasn't sure if it was for support or just to make sure the dwarf was still there.

Blitzen hefted his broadsword, which was almost as tall as he was. "Loki, you won't do this to Hearth. I won't let you."

"My dear dwarf, I appreciate you finding the tomb's entrance! And of course I needed Hearthstone to break the magic seal around that sarcophagus. You each played your part well, but I'm afraid I require just a *bit* more from you both. You want to see Samirah happily married, don't you?"

"To a giant?" Blitzen snorted. "No."

"But it's for a good cause! The return of what's-his-name's hammer! That means I need a proper bride-price, and Thrym has asked for the Skofnung Sword. It's a very reasonable exchange. The thing is, the sword isn't complete without the stone. The two are a set."

"What do you mean?" I asked. "What stone?"

"The Skofnung Stone—the whetstone that was made to sharpen the blade!" With his thumbs and fingers, Loki made a circle about the size of a dessert plate. "About yea big, blue with gray flecks." He winked at Hearthstone. "Sound familiar?"

Hearthstone looked as if his scarf was choking him.

"Hearth," I said, "what's he talking about?"

My elf friend didn't answer.

Uncle Randolph stumbled, now using both hands to hold up the cursed sword. The iron blade turned darker, and wisps of ice vapor twisted from its

edges.

“It’s getting heavier,” Randolph gasped. “Colder.”

“Then we should hurry.” Loki looked down at the unconscious form of Samirah. “Randolph, let’s feed this hungry sword, shall we?”

“No way.” I raised my own blade. “Randolph, I don’t want to hurt you, but I will.”

My uncle let out a broken sob. “Magnus, you don’t understand. You don’t know what he’s planning—”

“*Randolph*,” Loki hissed, “if you want to see your family again, strike!”

Randolph lunged, thrusting the cursed blade—and I completely misjudged his target.

Stupid, Magnus. Unforgivably stupid.

I was only thinking about Sam lying helpless at Loki’s feet. I needed to defend her. I wasn’t thinking about prophecies, or how everything Loki did, even a casual glance at his daughter, was a trick.

I stepped to intercept my uncle’s strike, but he charged right past me. With a cry of horror, he buried the Skofnung Sword in Blitzen’s gut.



## EIGHTEEN

# I Need to Learn Many, Many More Cusswords in Sign Language

I HOWLED with rage.

I slashed upward, and the Skofnung Sword flew out of Randolph's grip, along with—ew, you might want to skip this part—a couple of pink things that looked like fingers.

Randolph stumbled back, cradling his fist against his chest. The Skofnung Sword clanged to the floor.

“Oh.” Blitzen’s eyes widened. The sword had gone straight through his chain mail vest. Blood seeped between his fingers.

He stumbled. Hearthstone caught him and dragged him away from Randolph and Loki.

I wheeled around on Loki. I raised Jack’s blade again and sliced through the god’s smug face, but his form just shimmered like a projection.

“He swings! He misses!” Loki shook his head. “Really, Magnus, we both know you can’t hurt me. I’m not fully *here!* Besides, fighting isn’t your strong suit. If you need to take out your anger on someone, go ahead and kill Randolph, but do it quickly. We have a lot to talk about, and your dwarf is bleeding out.”

I couldn’t breathe. I felt like someone was pouring pure hate right down my throat. I wanted to cut down my own uncle. I wanted to pull this tomb apart stone by stone. Suddenly I understood Ratatosk, the squirrel who only spoke malice and wanted to destroy the very tree he lived in.

It wasn't easy, but I pushed down the anger. Saving Blitz was more important than getting revenge.

"Jack," I said, "watch these meinfretrs. If they try to hurt Sam or take the Skofnung Sword, go into Cuisinart mode."

"You got it." Jack spoke in a deeper voice than usual, probably to impress the Skofnung Sword. "I'll protect the hot lady blade with my life! Oh, and also Sam."

I ran to Blitzen's side.

"That's it!" Loki cheered. "There's the Magnus Chase I know and love! Always thinking of others. Always the healer!"

I put my hands on Blitzen's gut, then glanced up at Hearthstone. "You got any runes that might help?"

Hearth shook his head. His own Ratatosk-level hatred smoldered in his eyes. I could see how desperately he wanted to do something, *anything*, but he'd already used two runes this morning. Any more would probably kill him.

Blitzen coughed. His face turned the color of putty. "I—I'm good, guys. Just need...a minute."

"Hold on, Blitz." Again, I summoned the power of Frey. My hands heated like the coils of an electric blanket, sending warmth into every cell of Blitzen's body. I slowed his circulation. I eased his pain. But the wound itself refused to heal. I felt it fighting me, tearing open tissue and capillaries faster than I could mend them, gnawing at Blitzen with malicious hunger.

I remembered Hearthstone's prophecy: *Blitzen. Bloodshed. Cannot be stopped.*

This was my fault. I should have seen it coming. I should've insisted that Blitz stay in Mimir's safe house eating delivery pizza. I should have listened to that stupid Back Bay goat-assassin.

"You're going to be fine," I said. "Stay with me."

Blitz's eyes were starting to lose focus. "Got...sewing kit in my vest pocket...if that helps."

I wanted to scream. It's a good thing Jack was no longer in my hands, because I would've pulled a full-on Kylo Ren temper tantrum.

I rose and faced Loki and Randolph. My expression must have been pretty frightening. Randolph backed all the way into a zombie niche, leaving a trail of blood from his wounded hand. I probably could've healed that for him, but I wasn't even tempted.

“Loki, what do you want?” I demanded. “How do I help Blitzen?”

The god spread his arms. “I am so glad you asked. Happily, those two questions have the same answer!”

“The stone,” Blitz gasped. “He wants...the stone.”

“Exactly!” Loki agreed. “You see, Magnus, wounds from the Skofnung Sword *never* heal. They just keep bleeding forever...or until death, whichever comes first. The only way to close that wound is with the Skofnung Stone. That’s why the two are such an important set.”

Hearthstone launched into a bout of sign language cursing so impressive it would’ve made a beautiful piece of performance art. Even if you didn’t know ASL, his gestures conveyed his anger better than any amount of yelling.

“Dear me,” Loki said. “I haven’t been called some of those names since my last flyingt with the Aesir! I’m sorry you feel that way, my elfish friend, but you’re the only one who can get that stone. You *know* it’s the only solution. You’d better run along home!”

“Home?” My mind moved at the speed of cold syrup. “You mean... Alfheim?”

Blitzen groaned. “Don’t make Hearth go. Not worth it, kid.”

I glared at Uncle Randolph, who was making himself at home in his zombie niche. With his ratty suit and scarred face, his eyes glazed from pain and blood loss, Randolph was already halfway to being undead.

“What is Loki after?” I asked him. “What does any of this have to do with Thor’s hammer?”

He gave me the same desolate expression he’d worn in my dream, when he’d turned to his family on the storm-tossed yacht and said *I’ll bring us home*. “Magnus, I—I’m so—”

“Sorry?” Loki supplied. “Yes, you’re very sorry, Randolph. We know. But really, Magnus, do you not see the connection? Maybe I need to be clearer. Sometimes I forget how slow you mortals can be. A—giant—has—the—hammer.”

He illustrated each word with exaggerated sign language. “Giant—gives—hammer—back—for—Samirah. We—exchange—gifts—at—wedding. Hammer—for—S-K-O-F-N-U-N-G.”

“Stop that!” I snarled.

“You understand, then?” Loki shook his hands out. “Good, because my fingers were getting tired. Now, I can’t give *half* a bride-price, can I? Thrym

will never accept that. I need the blade *and* the stone. Fortunately, your friend Hearthstone knows exactly where the stone can be found!"

"*That's why you arranged all this? Why you...?*" I gestured at Blitz, who lay in an expanding pool of red.

"Call it incentive," Loki said. "I wasn't sure you'd get me the stone merely for the purpose of Samirah's wedding, but you'll do it to save your friend. And, I'll remind you, this is all so *I* can help *you* get back what's-his-name's stupid hammer. It's a win-win. Unless, you know, your dwarf dies. They are such small, pitiful creatures. Randolph, come along now!"

My uncle shuffled toward Loki like a dog expecting a beating. I didn't feel much love for my uncle at the moment, but I also hated the way Loki treated him. I remembered the connection I'd had to Randolph during my dreams...feeling the overwhelming grief that motivated him.

"Randolph," I said, "you don't have to go with him."

He glanced at me, and I saw how wrong I was. When he stabbed Blitzen, something inside him had broken. He'd been drawn so far into this evil bargain now, given up so much to get back his dead wife and children, he couldn't imagine any other way.

Loki pointed to the Skofnung blade. "The sword, Randolph. Get the sword."

Jack's runes pulsed an angry purple. "Try it, comadre, and you'll lose more than a couple of fingers."

Randolph hesitated, as people tend to do when they are threatened by talking glowing swords.

Loki's smug confidence wavered. His eyes darkened. His scarred lips curled. I saw how badly he wanted that sword. He needed it for something much more important than a wedding gift.

I put my foot over the Skofnung blade. "Jack's right. This isn't going anywhere."

The veins in Loki's neck looked like they might explode. I was afraid he would kill Samirah and paint the walls with abstract swaths of dwarf, elf, and einherji.

I stared him down anyway. I didn't understand his plan, but I was starting to realize that he needed us alive...at least for now.

In the space of a nanosecond, the god regained his composure.

"Fine, Magnus," he said breezily. "Bring the sword and the stone with you when you bring the bride. Four days. I'll let you know where. And do

get a proper tuxedo. Randolph, come along. Chop-chop!"

My uncle winced.

Loki laughed. "Oh, sorry." He wriggled his pinky and ring finger. "Too soon?"

He grabbed Randolph's sleeve. The two men shot backward into the coffin portal like they were being sucked out of a moving jet plane. The sarcophagus imploded behind them.

Sam stirred. She sat up abruptly, as though her alarm had gone off. Her hijab slipped over her right eye like a pirate's patch. "What—what's going on?"

I felt too numb to explain. I was kneeling next to Blitzen, doing what I could to keep him stable. My hands glowed with enough Frey-power to cause a nuclear meltdown, but it wasn't helping. My friend was slipping away.

Hearth's eyes brimmed with tears. He sat next to Blitz, his polka-dot scarf trailing in blood. Every once in a while he smacked a V sign against his own forehead: *Stupid. Stupid.*

Sam's shadow fell across us. "No! No, no, no. What *happened?*"

Hearthstone flew into another sign language tirade: *Told you! Too dangerous! Your fault we—*

"Buddy..." Blitzen pulled weakly at Hearthstone's hands. "Not Sam's... fault. Not yours. Was...my idea."

Hearthstone shook his head. *Stupid Valkyrie. Stupid me, also. Must be a way to heal you.*

He looked to me, desperate for a miracle.

I *hated* being a healer. Frey's Fripperies, I wished I were a warrior. Or a shape-shifter like Alex Fierro, or a rune caster like Hearthstone, or even a berserker like Halfborn, charging into battle in my underwear. Having my friends' lives depend on my abilities, watching the light go out of Blitzen's eyes and knowing there was nothing I could do about it...that was unbearable.

"Loki wouldn't leave us another choice," I said. "We have to find the Skofnung Stone."

Hearthstone grunted in frustration. *I would do it. For Blitz. But no time. Would take a day at least. He will die.*

Blitzen tried to say something. No words came out. His head lolled sideways.

“No!” Sam sobbed. “No, he can’t die. Where’s this stone? I’ll go get it myself!”

I scanned the tomb, frantic for ideas. My eyes fixed on the only source of light—Samirah’s spear, lying in dust.

Light. *Sunlight*.

There was one last miracle I could try—a lame, bottom-shelf miracle, but it was all I had.

“We need more time,” I said, “so we’ll *make* more time.” I wasn’t sure Blitzen was still lucid, but I squeezed his shoulder. “We’ll bring you back, buddy. I promise.”

I stood. I raised my face toward the domed ceiling and imagined the sun overhead. I called on my father—the god of warmth and fertility, the god of living things that broke through the earth to reach the light.

The tomb rumbled. Dust rained down. Directly above me, the domed ceiling cracked like an eggshell and a jagged canyon of sunlight spilled through the darkness, illuminating Blitzen’s face.

As I watched, one of my best friends in the Nine Worlds turned to solid rock.



## Should I Be Nervous that the Pilot Is Praying?

THE PROVINCETOWN airport was the most depressing place I'd ever been. To be fair, that might have been because I was in the company of a petrified dwarf, a heartbroken elf, a furious Valkyrie, and a sword that would not shut up.

Sam had called an Uber car to get us from the Pilgrim Monument. I wondered if she used Uber as a backup for transporting souls to Valhalla. All the way to the airport, crammed in the backseat of a Ford Focus station wagon, I couldn't stop humming "Flight of the Valkyries."

Next to me, Jack hogged the seat belt and pestered me with questions. "Can we unsheathe Skofnung again just for a minute? I want to say hi."

"Jack, no. She can't be drawn in sunlight or in the presence of women. And if we *did* unsheathe her, she'd have to kill somebody."

"Yeah, but except for that, wouldn't it be awesome?" He sighed, his runes lighting up his blade. "She's so fine."

"Please go into pendant mode."

"Do you think she liked me? I didn't say anything stupid, did I? Be honest."

I bit back a few scathing remarks. It wasn't Jack's fault we were in this predicament. Still, I was relieved when I finally convinced him to turn into a pendant. I told him he needed his beauty rest in case we unsheathed Skofnung later.

When we got to the airport, I helped Hearthstone wrestle our granite dwarf out of the station wagon while Sam went into the terminal.

The airport itself wasn't much to look at—just a one-room shack for arrivals and departures, a couple of benches out front, and beyond the security fence, two runways for small planes.

Sam hadn't explained why we were here. I guessed she was using her pilot-y connections to get us a charter flight back to Boston. Obviously she couldn't fly all four of us under her own power, and Hearthstone was in no shape to cast any more runes.

Hearth had spent his last bit of magical energy to summon Bubble Wrap and strapping tape, using a rune that looked like a regular X. Maybe it was the ancient Viking symbol for shipping materials. Maybe it was the rune for Alfheim Express. Hearthstone was so angry and miserable I didn't dare ask him. I just stood outside the terminal, waiting for Sam to come back, while Hearth carefully wrapped up his best friend.

We'd come to a sort of truce while waiting for the Uber car. Hearth, Sam, and I all felt like stripped high-voltage wires, supercharged with guilt and resentment, ready to kill anyone who touched us. But we knew that wasn't going to help Blitzen. We hadn't discussed it, but we'd formed a silent agreement not to yell and scream and hit each other until later. Right now, we had a dwarf to heal.

Finally, Sam emerged from the terminal. She must have stopped by the restroom, because her hands and face were still damp.

"The Cessna is on its way," she said.

"Your instructor's plane?"

She nodded. "I had to beg and plead. But Barry's really nice. He understands it's an emergency."

"Does he know about...?" I gestured around, weakly implying the Nine Worlds, petrified dwarves, undead warriors, evil gods, and all the other messed-up things about our lives.

"No," Sam said. "And I'd like to keep it that way. I can't fly airplanes if my instructor thinks I'm delusional."

She glanced over at Hearthstone's Bubble-Wrapping project. "No change in Blitzen? He hasn't started...crumbling yet?"

A slug wriggled down my throat. "Crumbling? Please tell me that's not going to happen."

“I hope not. But sometimes...” Sam closed her eyes and took a second to compose herself. “Sometimes after a few days...”

As if I needed a reason to feel guiltier. “When we find the Skofnung Stone...there *is* a way to un-petrify Blitz, right?”

That seemed like I question I should have asked *before* turning my friend into a chunk of granite, but, hey, I’d been under a lot of pressure.

“I—I hope so,” Sam said.

That made me feel a whole lot better.

Hearthstone looked over at us. He signed to Sam in small angry gestures: *Plane? You will drop Magnus, me. You don't come.*

Sam looked stung, but she held her hand up next to her face, index finger pointing skyward. *Understand.*

Hearthstone went back to packaging our dwarf.

“Give him time,” I told Sam. “It isn’t your fault.”

Sam studied the pavement. “I wish I believed that.”

I wanted to ask about Loki’s control over her, to tell her how bad I felt for her, to promise we would find a way to fight her father. But I guessed it was too soon to bring up all that. Her shame was still too raw.

“What did Hearthstone mean about dropping us?” I asked.

“I’ll explain when we’re in the air.” Sam pulled out her phone and checked the time. “It’s *zuhr*. We’ve got about twenty minutes before the plane lands. Magnus, can I borrow you?”

I didn’t know what *zuhr* meant, but I followed her to a little grassy area in the middle of the circular driveway.

Samirah rummaged through her backpack. She pulled out a folded blue piece of cloth like an oversize scarf and spread it on the grass. My first thought: *We’re having a picnic?*

Then I realized she was aligning the cloth so it pointed southeast. “That’s a prayer rug?”

“Yeah,” she said. “It’s time for noon prayers. Would you stand watch for me?”

“I...wait. What?” I felt like she was handing me a newborn baby and asking me to take care of it. In all the weeks I’d known Sam, I’d never seen her pray. I figured she just didn’t do it very often. That’s what I would’ve done in her place—as little religious stuff as possible. “How can you pray at a time like this?”

She laughed without humor. “The real question is, how can I *not* pray at a time like this? It won’t take long. Just stand guard in case...I don’t know, trolls attack or something.”

“Why haven’t I ever seen you do this before?”

Sam shrugged. “I pray every day. Five times, as required. Usually I just slip away to somewhere quiet, though if I’m traveling or in a dangerous situation, sometimes I postpone prayers until I’m sure it’s safe. That’s permissible.”

“Like when we were in Jotunheim?”

She nodded. “That’s a good for instance. Since we’re not in danger at the moment, and since you’re here, and since it’s time...do you mind?”

“Uh...no. I mean, yeah, sure. Go for it.”

I’d been in some pretty surreal situations. I’d bellied up to a dwarven bar. I’d run from a giant squirrel through the tree of the universe. I’d rappelled down a curtain into a giant’s dining room. But guarding Samirah al-Abbas while she prayed in an airport parking lot...that was a new one.

Sam took off her shoes. She stood very still at the foot of her rug, her hands clasped at her stomach, her eyes half-closed. She whispered something under her breath. She momentarily brought her hands to her ears —the same gesture we’d use in ASL for *listen carefully*. Then she began her prayers, a soft, singsong chanting of Arabic that sounded like she was reciting a familiar poem or a love song. Sam bowed, straightened, and knelt with her feet tucked under her and pressed her forehead against the cloth.

I’m not saying I stared at her. It felt wrong to gawk. But I kept watch from what I hoped was a respectful distance.

I have to admit I was kind of fascinated. Also maybe a little envious. Even after all that had just happened to her, after being controlled and knocked unconscious by her evil father, Sam seemed momentarily at peace. She was generating her own little bubble of tranquility.

I never prayed, because I didn’t believe in one all-powerful God. But I wished I had Sam’s level of faith in something.

The prayer didn’t take long. Sam folded her rug and stood. “Thanks, Magnus.”

I shrugged, still feeling like an intruder. “Any better now?”

She smirked. “It’s not magic.”

“Yeah, but...we see magic all the time. Isn’t it hard, like, believing there’s something more powerful out there than all these Norse beings we

deal with? Especially if—no offense—the Big Dude doesn’t step in to help out?”

Sam tucked her prayer mat into her bag. “Not stepping in, not interfering, not forcing...to me, that seems more merciful and more divine, don’t you think?”

I nodded. “Good point.”

I hadn’t seen Sam crying, but the corners of her eyes were tinged with pink. I wondered if she cried the same way she prayed—privately, stepping away to some quiet place so we didn’t notice.

She glanced at the sky. “Besides, who says Allah doesn’t help?” She pointed to the gleaming white shape of an airplane making its approach. “Let’s go meet Barry.”

Surprise! Not only did we get an airplane and a pilot, we also got Sam’s boyfriend.

Sam was jogging across the tarmac when the plane’s door opened. The first person down the steps was Amir Fadlan, a brown leather jacket over his white Fadlan’s Falafel T-shirt, his hair slicked back, and gold-rimmed sunglasses over his eyes so he looked like one of those aviator dudes in a Breitling watch ad.

Sam slowed when she saw him, but it was too late for her to hide. She glanced back at me with a panicked expression, then went to meet her betrothed.

I missed the first part of their conversation. I was too busy helping Hearthstone lug a stone dwarf to the plane. Sam and Amir stood at the bottom step, trading exasperated hand gestures and pained expressions.

When I finally reached them, Amir was pacing back and forth like he was practicing a speech. “I shouldn’t even be here. I thought you were in danger. I thought it was life and death. I—” He froze in his tracks. “Magnus?”

He stared at me as if I’d just fallen out of the sky, which wasn’t fair, since I hadn’t fallen out of the sky in hours.

“Hey, man,” I said. “There is totally a good reason for all this. Like, a really good reason. Like, Samirah didn’t do...*anything* that you might be thinking that she did that was wrong. Because she didn’t do that.”

Sam glared at me: *Not helping.*

Amir's gaze drifted to Hearthstone. "I recognize you, too. From a couple of months ago, at the food court. Sam's so-called math study group..." He shook his head in disbelief. "So you're the elf Sam was talking about? And Magnus...you're...you're dead. Sam said she took your soul to Valhalla. And the dwarf"—he stared at our Bubble-Wrapped carry-on Blitzen—"is a statue?"

"Temporarily," I said. "That wasn't Sam's fault, either."

Amir let out one of those crazy laughs you never want to hear—the kind that indicates the brain has developed a few cracks that will not come out with buffing. "I don't even know where to start. Sam, are you okay? Are...are you in trouble?"

Samirah's cheeks turned the color of cranberry sauce. "It's...complicated. I'm so sorry, Amir. I didn't expect—"

"That he would be here?" said a new voice. "Darling, he wouldn't take no for an answer."

Standing in the plane's doorway was a thin, dark-skinned man so well dressed that Blitzen would have wept with joy: maroon skinny jeans, pastel green shirt, double-breasted vest, and pointy leather boots. The laminated pilot's ID hanging around his neck read BARRY AL-JABBAR.

"My dears," said Barry, "if we're going to keep to our flight plan, you should come aboard. We just need to refuel and we'll be on our way. And as for you, Samirah..." He raised an eyebrow. He had the warmest gold eyes I'd ever seen. "Forgive me for telling Amir, but when you called, I was worried sick. Amir is a dear friend. And whatever drama is going on between you two, I expect you to fix it! As soon as he heard you were in trouble, he insisted on coming along. So..." Barry cupped his hand to his mouth and stage-whispered, "We'll just say I'm your chaperone, shall we? Now, all aboard!"

Barry whirled and disappeared back inside the plane. Hearthstone followed, lugging Blitzen up the steps behind him.

Amir wrung his hands. "Sam, I'm trying to understand. Really."

She looked down at her belt, maybe just realizing she was still wearing her battle-ax. "I—I know."

"I'll do anything for you," Amir said. "Just...don't stop talking to me, okay? Tell me. No matter how crazy it is, tell me."

She nodded. "You'd better get on board. I need to do my walk-around inspection."

Amir glanced at me once more—as if he was trying to figure out where my death wounds were—then he climbed the steps.

I turned to Sam. “He flew out here for you. Your safety is all he cares about.”

“I know.”

“That’s *good*, Sam.”

“I don’t deserve it. I wasn’t honest with him. I just...I didn’t want to infect the one *normal* part of my life.”

“The abnormal part of your life is standing right here.”

Her shoulders slumped. “I’m sorry. I know you’re trying to help. I wouldn’t change having you in my life, Magnus.”

“Well, that’s good,” I said. “Because there’s a whole lot more crazy coming up.”

Sam nodded. “Speaking of which, you’d better find a seat and buckle in.”

“Why? Is Barry a bad pilot?”

“Oh, Barry’s an excellent pilot, but he’s not flying you. *I* am—straight to Alfheim.”



TWENTY

## In Case of Demonic Possession, Please Follow Illuminated Signs to the Nearest Exit

BARRY STOOD in the aisle to address us, his elbows on the seatbacks on either side. His cologne made the plane smell like the Boston Flower Exchange. “So, my dears, have you ever flown in a Citation XLS before?”

“Uh, no,” I said. “I think I would remember.”

The cabin wasn’t big, but it was all white leather with gold trim, like a BMW with wings. Four passenger seats faced each other to form a sort of conference area. Hearthstone and I sat looking forward. Amir sat across from me, and petrified Blitzen was strapped in opposite Hearth.

Sam was up in the pilot’s seat, checking dials and flipping switches. I’d thought all planes had doors separating the cockpit from the passenger area, but not the Citation. From where I sat, I could see straight out the front windshield. I was tempted to ask Amir to trade places with me. A view of the restroom would have been less nerve-racking.

“Well,” said Barry, “as your copilot on this flight, it’s my job to give you a quick safety briefing. The main exit is here.” He rapped his knuckles on the cabin door through which we’d entered. “In case of emergency, if Sam and I aren’t able to open it for you, you—*SHOULD HAVE LISTENED TO ME, MAGNUS CHASE.*”

Barry’s voice deepened and tripled in volume. Amir, who was sitting right under his elbow, nearly leaped into my lap.

In the cockpit, Sam turned around slowly. “Barry?”

*“I WARNED YOU.”* Barry’s new voice crackled with distortion, and fluctuated up and down in pitch. *“YET YOU FELL INTO LOKI’S TRAP.”*

“Wh-what’s wrong with him?” Amir asked. “That’s not Barry.”

“No,” I agreed, my throat as dry as a zombie berserker’s. “That’s my favorite assassin.”

Hearthstone looked even more confused than Amir. He couldn’t hear the change in Barry’s voice, obviously, but he could tell that the safety briefing had gone off the rails.

*“NOW THERE IS NO CHOICE,”* said Barry-not-Barry. *“ONCE YOU HEAL YOUR FRIEND, FIND ME IN JOTUNHEIM. I WILL GIVE YOU THE INFORMATION YOU NEED TO DEFEAT LOKI’S PLAN.”*

I studied the copilot’s face. His gold eyes looked unfocused, but otherwise I couldn’t see anything different about him.

“You’re the goat-killer,” I said. “The guy who was watching me from the tree branch at the feast.”

Amir couldn’t stop blinking. “Goat-killer? Tree branch?”

*“SEEK OUT HEIMDALL,”* said the distorted voice. *“HE WILL POINT YOU IN MY DIRECTION. BRING THE OTHER, ALEX FIERRO. SHE IS NOW YOUR ONLY HOPE FOR SUCCESS.—And that covers everything. Any questions?”*

Barry’s voice had returned to normal. He smiled contentedly, like he could think of no better way to spend his day than flying back and forth from Cape Cod, helping his friends, and channeling the voices of otherworldly ninjas.

Amir, Hearth, and I shook our heads vehemently.

“No questions,” I said. “Not a single one.”

I locked eyes with Sam. She gave me a shrug and a head shake, like, Yes, *I heard. My copilot was briefly possessed. What do you want me to do about it?*

“Okay, then.” Barry patted Blitzen’s granite noggin. “Headsets are in the compartments next to you if you want to talk to us in the cockpit. It’s a very short flight to Norwood Memorial. Sit back and enjoy!”

*Enjoy* was not the word I would’ve used.

Small confession: not only had I never flown in a Citation XLS, I had never flown in an airplane. My first time probably should not have been in

an eight-seat Cessna flown by a girl my age who'd only been taking lessons for a few months.

That wasn't Sam's fault. I had nothing to compare it to, but the takeoff seemed smooth. At least we got airborne without any fatalities. Still, my fingernails left permanent gouges in the armrests. Every bump of turbulence jolted me so badly I felt nostalgic for our old friend Stanley, the canyon-diving eight-legged flying horse. (Well, almost.)

Amir declined to use a headset, maybe because his brain was already overloaded with crazy Norse information. He sat with his arms crossed, staring morosely out the window as if wondering whether we would ever land in the real world again.

Sam's voice crackled in my headphones. "We've reached cruising altitude. Thirty-two minutes left in flight."

"Everything good up there?" I asked.

"Yeah..." The connection beeped. "There. No one else is on this channel. Our *friend* seems okay now. Anyway, there's no need to worry. I've got the controls."

"Who, me? Worry?"

From what I could see, Barry seemed pretty chill at the moment. He was kicking back in the copilot's seat staring at his iPad. I wanted to believe he was keeping an eye on important aviation readings, but I was pretty sure he was playing *Candy Crush*.

"Any thoughts?" I asked Sam. "I mean about Goat-Killer's advice?"

Static. Then: "He said we should seek him out in Jotunheim. So he's a giant. That doesn't necessarily mean he's bad. My father"—she hesitated, probably trying to get the word's sour taste out of her mouth—"he has lots of enemies. Whoever Goat-Killer is, he's got some powerful magic. He was right about Provincetown. We should listen to him. *I* should've listened sooner."

"Don't do that," I said. "Don't beat yourself up."

Amir tried to focus on me. "Sorry, what?"

"Not you, man." I tapped the headset mic. "Talking to Sam."

Amir mouthed a silent *Ah*. He returned to practicing his forlorn stare out the window.

"Amir isn't on this channel?" Sam asked.

"No."

“After I drop you guys, I’m going to take the Skofnung Sword to Valhalla for safekeeping. I can’t take Amir into the hotel, but...I’m going to try to show him what I can. Show him my life.”

“Good call. He’s strong, Sam. He can handle it.”

A three-second count of white noise. “I hope you’re right. I’ll also update the gang on floor nineteen.”

“What about Alex Fierro?”

Sam glanced back at me. It was weird seeing her a few feet away but hearing her voice right in my ears. “Bringing her along is a bad idea, Magnus. You saw what Loki could do to me. Imagine what he...”

I could imagine. But I also sensed that Goat-Killer had a point. We would need Alex Fierro. Her arrival in Valhalla wasn’t a coincidence. The Norns, or some other weird prophecy gods, had interwoven her fate with ours.

“I don’t think we should underestimate her,” I said, remembering her fighting those wolves, and riding a bucking lindworm. “Also, I trust her. I mean, as much as you can trust somebody who has cut your head off. Do you have any idea how to find the god Heimdall?”

The static sounded heavier, angrier. “Unfortunately, yes,” Sam said. “Get ready. We’re almost in position.”

“For landing in Norwood? I thought you said we were going to Alfheim.”

“*You* are. I’m not. The flight path to Norwood puts us just over the optimal drop zone.”

“*Drop* zone?” I really hoped I had misheard her.

“Look, I have to concentrate on flying this plane. Ask Hearthstone.” My headphones went silent.

Hearthstone was having a staring contest with Blitzen. The dwarf’s granite face poked out from his Bubble-Wrap cocoon, his expression frozen in dying agony. Hearthstone didn’t look much happier. The misery swirling around him was almost as easy to see as his bloodstained polka-dotted scarf.

*Alfheim*, I signed. *How do we get there?*

*Jump*, Hearth told me.

My stomach dropped out from under me. “Jump? Jump out of the *plane*?”

Hearth stared past me, the way he does when he’s considering how to explain something complicated in sign language...usually something I won’t

like.

*Alfheim kingdom of air, light*, he signed. *Can only be entered...* He pantomimed free-falling.

“This is a jet plane,” I said. “We can’t jump—we’ll die!”

*Not die*, Hearth promised. *Also, not jump exactly. Just...* He made a *poof* gesture, which did not reassure me. *We cannot die until we save Blitzen.*

For a guy who rarely made a sound, Hearthstone could speak in defiant shouts when he wanted to. He’d just given me my marching orders: poof out of this plane; fall to Alfheim; save Blitzen. Only after that would it be okay for me to die.

Amir shifted in his seat. “Magnus? You look nervous.”

“Yeah.” I was tempted to make up some simple explanation, something that wouldn’t add any more cracks to Amir’s generous mortal brain. But we were beyond that now. Amir was fully in Sam’s life, for better or worse, normal or abnormal. He’d always been kind to me. He’d fed me when I was homeless, treated me like a person when most people pretended I was invisible. He’d come to our rescue today without knowing any details, just because Sam was in trouble. I couldn’t lie to him.

“Apparently, Hearth and I are going to go *poof*.” I told him my marching orders.

Amir looked so lost I wanted to give the guy a hug.

“Until last week,” he said, “my biggest worry was where to expand our falafel franchise, Jamaica Plain or Chestnut Hill. Now I’m not even sure what *world* we’re flying through.”

I checked to make sure my headset mic was switched off. “Amir, Sam is the same as she’s always been. She’s brave. She’s strong.”

“I know that.”

“She’s also head-over-heels crazy about you,” I said. “She didn’t ask for any of this weirdness in her life. Her biggest concern is that it doesn’t mess up her future with you. Believe that.”

He hung his head like a puppy in a kennel. “I...I’m trying, Magnus. It’s just so strange.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Here’s a heads-up: It’s going to get stranger.” I switched on my microphone. “Sam?”

“I could hear that entire conversation,” she announced.

“Ah.” Apparently I hadn’t figured out the headset controls after all. “Um  
\_\_\_”

“I’ll kill you later,” she said. “Right now, your exit is coming up.”

“Wait. Won’t Barry notice if we just disappear?”

“He’s mortal. His brain will recalibrate. After all, people don’t just vanish off jet planes in mid-flight. By the time we land in Norwood, he probably won’t even remember you were here.”

I wanted to think I was a little more memorable than that, but I was too nervous to worry about it.

Next to me, Hearthstone unlatched his seat belt. He pulled off his scarf and tied it around Blitzen, fashioning a sort of makeshift harness.

“Good luck,” Sam told me. “I’ll see you back in Midgard, assuming... you know.”

*Assuming we live, I thought. Assuming we can heal Blitzen. Assuming our luck is better than it has been the past two days...or ever.*

Between one heartbeat and the next, the Cessna disappeared. I found myself floating in the sky, my headphones plugged into nothing at all.

Then I fell.



## TWENTY-ONE

# Loiterers Will Be Shot, Then Arrested and Shot Again

BLITZEN ONCE told me that dwarves never left home without a parachute.

Now I understood the wisdom in that. Hearthstone and I plummeted through the frigid air, me waving my arms and screaming, Hearth in a perfect swan dive with granite Blitzen tied to his back. Hearth glanced over at me reassuringly, as if to say, *Don't worry. The dwarf is Bubble-Wrapped.*

My only response was more incoherent screaming, because I didn't know the ASL for *HOLY FREAKING AGGGHHH!*

We punched through a cloud and everything changed. Our fall slowed. The air turned warm and sweet. The sunlight intensified, blinding me.

We hit the ground. Well, sort of. My feet touched down on freshly mown grass and I bounced right off, feeling like I weighed about twenty pounds. I astronaut-skipped across the lawn until I found my balance.

I squinted through the searing sunlight, trying to get my bearings—acres of landscaping, tall trees, a big house in the distance. Everything seemed haloed in fire. No matter which direction I turned, I felt as though a spotlight was shining straight in my face.

Hearthstone grabbed my arm. He pressed something into my hands: a pair of dark sunglasses. I put them on and the stabbing pain in my eyes subsided.

“Thanks,” I muttered. “Is it this bright all the time?”

Hearthstone frowned. I must have been slurring my words. He was having trouble reading my lips. I repeated the question in sign language.

*Always bright*, Hearth agreed. *You get used to it.*

He scanned our surroundings as if looking for threats.

We'd landed on the front lawn of a big estate. Low stone walls hedged the property—a golf course-size expanse of well-kept flower beds and thin willowy trees that looked as if they'd been pulled upward by gravity as they grew. The house was a Tudor-style mansion with leaded glass windows and conical turrets.

*Who lives here?* I signed to Hearth. *President of Alfheim?*

*Just a family. The Makepieces.* He spelled out their name.

*They must be important*, I signed.

Hearth shrugged. *Regular. Middle-class.*

I laughed, then realized he wasn't joking. If this was a middle-class family in Alfheim, I didn't want to split a lunch tab with the one-percenters.

*We should go*, Hearth signed. *Makepieces don't like me.* He readjusted his scarf harness for Blitzen, who probably weighed no more than a regular backpack in Alfheim.

Together we headed for the road.

I have to admit, the lighter gravity made me feel...well, lighter. I bounded along, covering five feet with every step. I had to restrain myself from leaping farther. With my einherji strength, if I wasn't careful, I might have found myself jumping over the rooftops of middle-class mansions.

As far as I could tell, Alfheim was just row after row of estates like the Makepieces', each property at least several acres, each lawn dotted with flower beds and topiaries. In the cobblestone driveways, black luxury SUVs gleamed. The air smelled like baked hibiscus and crisp dollar bills.

Sam had said our flight path to Norwood would put us over the best drop zone. Now that made sense. In the same way Nidavellir resembled Southie, Alfheim reminded me of the posh suburbs west of Boston—Wellesley, maybe, with its huge houses and pastoral landscapes, its winding roads, picturesque creeks, and sleepy aura of absolute safety...assuming you belonged there.

On the downside, the sunlight was so harsh it accentuated every imperfection. Even one stray leaf or wilted flower in a garden stood out as a glaring problem. My own clothes looked dirtier. I could see every pore on the back of my hands and the veins under my skin.

I also understood what Hearthstone meant about Alfheim being made of air and light. The whole place seemed unreal, like it was whisked together

from cotton candy fibers and might dissolve with a splash of water. Walking across the spongy ground, I felt uneasy and impatient. The super-dark sunglasses only did so much to alleviate my headache.

After a few blocks, I signed to Hearthstone: *Where are we going?*

He pursed his lips. *Home*.

I caught his arm and made him stop.

*Your home?* I signed. *Where you grew up?*

Hearth stared at the nearest quaint garden wall. Unlike me, he wore no sunglasses. In the brilliant daylight, his eyes glittered like crystal formations.

*Skofnung Stone is at home*, he signed. *With...Father*.

The sign for *father* was an open hand, palm facing out, thumb across the forehead. It reminded me of *L* for *loser*. Given what I knew about Hearth's childhood, that seemed appropriate.

Once, in Jotunheim, I'd done some healing magic on Hearth. I'd gotten a glimpse of the pain he carried around inside. He'd been mistreated and shamed while growing up, mostly because of his deafness. Then his brother had died—I didn't know the details—and his parents had blamed Hearth. He couldn't possibly want to go back to a home like that.

I remembered how strongly Blitzen had protested the idea, even when he knew he was going to die. *Don't make Hearth go. Not worth it, kid.*

Yet here we were.

*Why?* I signed. *Why would your father (loser) have the Skofnung Stone?*

Instead of answering, Hearthstone nodded in the direction we'd come. Everything was so bright in Elf World, I hadn't noticed the flashing lights until the sleek black town car pulled up directly behind us. Along the sedan's front grill, red and blue sequencers pulsed. Behind the windshield, two elves in business suits scowled at us.

The Alfheim Police Department had come to say hello.

"Can we help you?" asked the first cop.

Right then, I knew we were in trouble. In my experience, no cop ever said *can we help you* if he had any actual desire to help. Another giveaway: cop number one's hand was resting on the butt of his sidearm.

Cop number two edged around the passenger side, also looking ready to break out some helpful deadly force.

Both elves were dressed like plainclothes detectives—in dark suits and silk ties, with ID badges clipped to their belts. Their short-cropped hair was

as blond as Hearthstone's. They had the same sort of pale eyes and eerily calm expressions.

Otherwise they looked nothing like my friend. The cops seemed taller, spindlier, more alien. They exuded a cold air of disdain as though they had personal AC units installed under their shirt collars.

The other thing I found strange: *they spoke*. I'd spent so much time around Hearthstone, who communicated in eloquent silence, that hearing an elf speak was really jarring. It just seemed wrong.

Both cops focused on Hearthstone. They looked right through me as if I didn't exist.

"I asked you a question, pal," the first cop said. "Is there a problem here?"

Hearthstone shook his head. He edged back, but I caught his arm. Retreating would only make things worse.

"We're good," I said. "Thanks, officers."

The detectives stared at me like I was from another world, which, to be fair, I was.

The ID tag on cop number one's belt read SUNSPOT. He didn't look much like a sunspot. Then again, I guessed I didn't look much like a chaste.

Cop number two's ID read WILDFLOWER. With a handle like that, I wanted him to be wearing a Hawaiian shirt or at least a floral-pattern tie, but his outfit was just as boring as his partner's.

Sunspot wrinkled his nose as if I smelled like a wight's barrow.  
"Where'd you learn Elfish, thick? That accent is horrible."

"*Thick?*" I asked.

Wildflower smirked at his partner. "What do you bet Elfish isn't his first language? Illegal *husvaettr* would be my guess."

I wanted to point out that I was a human speaking English, and it was my first language. Also my only language. Elfish and English just happened to be the same, like Hearth's Alf Sign Language was the same as American Sign Language.

I doubted the cops would listen or care. The way they spoke was a little strange to my ears: a sort of old-fashioned, aristocratic American accent I'd heard on newsreels and movies from the 1930s.

"Look, guys," I said, "we're just taking a walk."

"In a nice neighborhood," said Sunspot, "where I'm guessing you don't live. The Makepieces down the road—they called in a report. Somebody

trespassing, loitering. We take that sort of thing seriously, thick.”

I had to tamp down my anger. As a homeless person, I’d been a frequent target for rough treatment by law enforcement. My darker-skinned friends got it even worse. So, during the two years I lived on the street, I’d learned a whole new level of caution when dealing with “friendly” neighborhood police officers.

And yet...I didn’t like being called a *thick*. Whatever that was.

“Officers,” I said, “we’ve been walking for maybe five minutes. We’re heading to my friend’s house. How is that loitering?”

Hearthstone signed to me: *Careful*.

Sunspot frowned. “What was that? Some kind of gang sign? Speak Elfish.”

“He’s deaf,” I said.

“Deaf?” Wildflower’s face scrunched up in disgust. “What kind of elf —?”

“Whoa, partner.” Sunspot swallowed. He tugged at his collar like his personal AC had stopped working. “Is that...? That’s gotta be...you know, Mr. Alderman’s kid.”

Wildflower’s expression shifted from contempt to fear. It would’ve been kind of satisfying to watch, except that a fearful cop was way more dangerous than a disgusted one.

“Mr. Hearthstone?” Wildflower asked. “Is that you?”

Hearthstone nodded glumly.

Sunspot cursed. “All right. Both of you, in the car.”

“Whoa, why?” I demanded. “If you’re arresting us, I want to know the charges—”

“We’re not arresting you, thick,” Sunspot growled. “We’re taking you to see Mr. Alderman.”

“After that,” Wildflower added, “you won’t be our problem anymore.”

His tone made it sound like we’d be *no one*’s problem, since we’d be buried under a lovely well-tended flower bed somewhere. The last thing I wanted to do was get in the car, but the cops tapped their fingers on their Elfish firearms, showing us just how helpful they were prepared to be.

I climbed into the back of the cruiser.



## TWENTY-TWO

# Pretty Sure Hearthstone's Dad Is a Cow-Abducting Alien

IT WAS the nicest cop car I'd ever been in, and I'd been in quite a few. The black leather interior smelled of vanilla. The Plexiglas divider was squeaky clean. The bench seat had a massage feature so I could relax after a hard day of loitering. Obviously, they served only the finest criminals here in Alfheim.

After a mile of comfortable cruising, we pulled off the main road and stopped at a pair of iron gates monogrammed with a fancy A. On either side, ten-foot-tall stone walls were topped with decorative spikes to keep out the upper-middle-class riffraff who lived down the street. From the tops of the gateposts, security cameras swiveled to study us.

The gates opened. As we drove through into Hearthstone's family estate, my jaw nearly dropped off. I thought *my* family mansion was embarrassing.

The front yard was bigger than the Boston Common. Swans glided across a lake edged with willow trees. We drove over two different bridges crossing a winding creek, past four different gardens, then through a second set of gates before coming to the main house, which looked like a postmodern version of Sleeping Beauty Castle at Disneyland—white-and-gray slab walls jutting out at strange angles, slender towers like organ pipes, huge plate glass windows, and a burnished steel front door so large it probably had to be opened by chain-pulling trolls.

Hearthstone fidgeted with his bag of runes, occasionally glancing back toward the car's trunk, where the cops had stowed Blitzen.

The officers said nothing until we parked at the front door.

"Out," Wildflower said.

As soon as Hearthstone was free, he walked to the back of the cruiser and rapped on the trunk.

"Yeah, fine." Sunspot popped the lid. "Though I don't see why you care. That has to be the *ugliest* dwarf lawn ornament I've ever seen."

Hearthstone gently lifted out Blitzen and slung the granite dwarf over his shoulder.

Wildflower shoved me toward the entrance. "Move, thick."

"Hey!" I almost reached for my pendant but caught myself. At least the cops now treated Hearthstone as off-limits, but they still seemed perfectly fine pushing me around. "Whatever *thick* means," I said, "I'm not it."

Wildflower snorted. "Have you looked in the mirror recently?"

It dawned on me that, compared to elves, all willowy and delicate and handsome, I must have looked squat and clumsy—*thick*. I got the feeling the term also implied mentally slow, because why insult someone on one level when you can insult them on two?

I was tempted to wreak my revenge on the police officers by bringing out Jack to sing some top-forty hits. Before I could, Hearthstone took my arm and led me up the front steps. The cops trailed behind us, putting distance between themselves and Hearthstone as if they feared his deafness might be contagious.

When we reached the top step, the big steel door swung open silently. A young woman hurried out to meet us. She was almost as short as Blitzen, though she had blond hair and delicate features like an elf. Judging from her plain linen dress and white hair bonnet, I assumed she was a house servant.

"Hearth!" Her eyes lit up in excitement, but she quickly stifled her enthusiasm when she saw our police escorts. "Mr. Hearthstone, I mean."

Hearth blinked like he might start crying. He signed: *Hello/Sorry*, blending them together in a single word.

Officer Wildflower cleared his throat. "Is your master home, Inge?"

"Oh—" Inge gulped. She looked at Hearthstone, then back at the cops. "Yes, sir, but—"

"Go get him," snapped Sunspot.

Inge turned and fled inside. As she hurried away, I noticed something hanging from the back of her skirt—a cord of brown-and-white fur, frayed at the end like the tassel of a belt. Then the tassel flicked, and I realized it was a living appendage.

“She’s got a cow tail,” I blurted.

Sunspot laughed. “Well, she’s a *hulder*. It would be illegal for her to hide that tail. We’d have to bring her in on charges of impersonating a proper elf.”

The cop gave Hearthstone a quick look of distaste, making it clear that his definition of *proper elf* also did not include my friend.

Wildflower grinned. “I don’t think the boy has ever seen a hulder before, Sunspot. What’s the matter, thick? They don’t have domesticated forest sprites in whatever world you crawled out of?”

I didn’t answer, though in my mind I was imagining Jack belting out Selena Gomez right in the policeman’s ears. The thought comforted me.

I stared into the foyer—a sunlit colonnade of white stone and glass skylights that still managed to make me feel claustrophobic. I wondered how Inge felt about being required to display her tail at all times. Was it a source of pride to show her identity, or did it feel like a punishment—a constant reminder of her lesser status? I decided the really horrible thing was entwining the two together: *Show us who you are; now feel bad about it.* Not much different from Hearth signing *hello* and *sorry* as a single word.

I felt Mr. Alderman’s presence before I saw him. The air turned cooler and carried a scent of spearmint. Hearthstone’s shoulders slumped as if Midgard gravity were taking over. He shifted Blitzen to the middle of his back as if to hide him. The spots on Hearth’s scarf seemed to swarm. Then I realized Hearth was shivering.

Footsteps echoed on the marble floor.

Mr. Alderman appeared, rounding one of the columns and marching toward us.

All four of us stepped back—Hearth, me, even the cops. Mr. Alderman was almost seven feet tall, and so thin that he looked like one of those UFO-flying, strange-medical-experiment-conducting aliens from Roswell. His eyes were too large. His fingers were too delicate. His jaw was so pointy I wondered if his face had been hung on a perfect isosceles triangle.

He dressed better than your average UFO traveler, though. His gray suit fit perfectly over a green turtleneck that made his neck look even longer. His

platinum blond hair bristled like Hearth's. I could see some family resemblance in the nose and the mouth, but Mr. Alderman's face was much more expressive. He looked harsh, critical, dissatisfied—like someone who'd just had an outrageously expensive, terrible meal and was contemplating the one-star review he was going to write.

"Well." His eyes dug into his son's face. "You're back. At least you had enough sense to bring the son of Frey with you."

Sunspot choked on his own smug smile. "Sorry, sir. Who?"

"This lad." Mr. Alderman pointed to me. "Magnus Chase, son of Frey, isn't it?"

"That's me." I bit back the urge to add *sir*. So far, this dude hadn't earned it.

I wasn't used to people looking impressed when they found out my dad was Frey. Reactions normally ranged from *Gee, I'm sorry* to *Who is Frey?* to hysterical laughter.

So I'm not going to lie. I appreciated how quickly the cops' expressions changed from contempt to oh-poop-we-just-dissed-a-demigod. I didn't understand it, but I liked it.

"We—we didn't know." Wildflower brushed a speck off my shirt like that would make everything better. "We, um—"

"Thank you, officers," Mr. Alderman cut in. "I will take it from here."

Sunspot gaped at me like he wanted to apologize, or possibly offer me a coupon for fifty percent off my next imprisonment.

"You heard the man," I said. "Off you go, Officers Sunspot and Wildflower. And don't worry. I'll remember you."

They bowed to me...actually *bowed*, then made a hasty retreat to their vehicle.

Mr. Alderman scrutinized Hearthstone as if looking for visible defects. "You're the same," he pronounced sourly. "At least the dwarf has turned to stone. That's an improvement."

Hearthstone clenched his jaw. He signed in short angry bursts: *His name is B-L-I-T-Z-E-N.*

"Stop," Alderman demanded. "None of that ridiculous hand-waving. Come inside." He gave me the subzero once-over. "We must properly welcome our guest."



## TWENTY-THREE

### Yep, His Other Car Is Definitely a UFO

WE WERE shown into the living room, where absolutely nothing was living. Light spilled in from huge picture windows. The thirty-foot ceiling glittered with a silver mosaic of swirling clouds. The polished marble floor was blindingly white. Lining the walls, illuminated niches displayed various minerals, stones, and fossils. All around the room, yet more artifacts sat under glass cases on white podiums.

As far as museums went—yeah, great space. As far as rooms where I wanted to hang out—no thanks. The only places to sit were two long wooden benches on either side of a steel coffee table. Above the mantel of the cold fireplace, a giant oil portrait of a young boy smiled down at me. He didn't look like Hearthstone. His dead brother, Andiron, I guessed. The boy's white suit and beaming face made him look like an angel. I wondered if Hearthstone had ever looked that happy as a child. I doubted it. The smiling elf boy was the only joyful thing in this room, and the smiling elf boy was dead—frozen in time like the other artifacts.

I was tempted to sit on the floor instead of the benches. I decided to try politeness. It hardly ever works for me, but once in a while I give it a shot.

Hearthstone put Blitzen down carefully on the floor. Then he sat next to me.

Mr. Alderman made himself uncomfortable on the bench across from us. “Inge,” he called, “refreshments.”

The hulder materialized in a nearby doorway. “Right away, sir.” She scurried off again, her cow tail swishing in the folds of her skirt.

Mr. Alderman fixed Hearthstone with a withering stare, or maybe it was his normal Wow-I-missed-you! expression. “Your room is as you left it. I assume you will be staying?”

Hearthstone shook his head. *We need your help. Then we will leave.*

“Use the slate, son.” Mr. Alderman gestured at the end table next to Hearth, where a small whiteboard sat with a marker attached by a string. The old elf glanced at me. “The slate encourages him to think before he speaks... if you can call that hand-waving speech.”

Hearthstone crossed his arms and glared at his father.

I decided to play translator before one of them killed the other. “Mr. Alderman, Hearth and I need your help. Our friend Blitzen—”

“Has turned to stone,” said Mr. Alderman. “Yes, I can see that. Fresh running water will bring back a petrified dwarf. I don’t see the issue.”

That information alone would’ve made the unpleasant trip to Alfheim worth it. I felt like the weight of a granite dwarf had been lifted from my shoulders. Unfortunately, we needed more.

“But see,” I said, “I turned Blitzen to stone on purpose. He was wounded by a sword. The Skofnung Sword.”

Mr. Alderman’s mouth twitched. “Skofnung.”

“Yeah. Is that funny?”

Alderman showed his perfect white teeth. “You’ve come here for my help. To heal this dwarf. You want the Skofnung Stone.”

“Yeah. You have it?”

“Oh, certainly.” Mr. Alderman gestured to one of the nearby podiums. Under a glass case sat a stone disc about the size of a dessert plate—gray with blue flecks, just as Loki had described.

“I collect artifacts from all the Nine Worlds,” said Mr. Alderman. “The Skofnung Stone was one of my first acquisitions. It was specially enchanted to withstand the magical edge of the sword—to sharpen it if necessary—and, of course, to provide an instant remedy in the event some foolish wielder cut himself.”

“That’s great,” I said. “How do you heal with it?”

Alderman chuckled. “Quite simple. You touch the stone to the wound, and the wound closes.”

“So...can we borrow it?”

“No.”

Why was I not surprised? Hearthstone gave me a look like, *Yes, Nine Worlds’ Best Dad.*

Inge returned with three silver goblets on a tray. After serving Mr. Alderman, she set a cup in front of me, then she smiled at Hearthstone and gave him his. When their fingers touched, Inge’s ears turned bright red. She hurried off back to...wherever she was required to stay, out of sight but within shouting distance.

The liquid in my cup looked like melted gold. I hadn’t eaten or drunk anything since breakfast, so I’d been kind of hoping for elfish sandwiches and sparkling water. I wondered if I was supposed to ask about the goblet’s creation and its famous deeds before I drank, the way I would in Nidavellir, the world of the dwarves. Something told me no. The dwarves treated every object they made as unique, deserving of a name. From what I’d seen so far, elves surrounded themselves with priceless artifacts and didn’t care about them any more than they cared about their servants. I doubted they named their goblets.

I took a sip. Without doubt, it was the best stuff I’d ever had—with the sweetness of honey, the richness of chocolate, and the coolness of glacier ice, yet it tasted unlike any of those. It filled my stomach more satisfyingly than a three-course meal. It completely quenched my thirst. The jolt it gave me made the mead of Valhalla seem like a knock-off brand of energy drink.

Suddenly, the living room was tinged with kaleidoscopic light. I gazed outside at the well-manicured lawn, the sculptured hedgerows, the garden topiaries. I wanted to pull off my sunglasses, break through the window, and go skipping merrily through Alfheim until the sun burned my eyes out.

I realized Mr. Alderman was watching me, waiting to see how I handled the elfish goofy juice. I blinked several times to get my thoughts back in order.

“Sir,” I said, because politeness was working so well, “why won’t you help us? I mean, the stone is right there.”

“I will not help you,” said Mr. Alderman, “because it would serve me no purpose.” He sipped his drink, raising his pinky finger to show off a glittering amethyst ring. “My...son...Hearthstone, deserves no help from me. He left years ago without a word.” He paused, then barked a laugh. “Without a word. Well, of course he did. But you take my meaning.”

I wanted to shove my goblet between his perfect teeth, but I restrained myself. “So Hearthstone left. Is that a crime?”

“It should be.” Alderman scowled. “In doing so, he killed his mother.”

Hearthstone choked and dropped his goblet. For a moment, the only sound was the cup rolling on the marble floor.

“You didn’t know?” Mr. Alderman asked. “Of course you didn’t. Why would you care? After you left, she was distracted and upset. You have no idea how you embarrassed us by disappearing. There were rumors about you studying rune magic, of all things, consorting with Mimir and his riffraff, befriending a *dwarf*. Well, one afternoon, your mother was crossing the street in the village, on her way back from the country club. She had endured awful comments from her friends at lunch. She feared her reputation was ruined. She wasn’t looking where she was going. When a delivery truck ran the red light...”

Alderman gazed at the mosaic ceiling. For a second, I could almost imagine he had emotions other than anger. I thought I detected sadness in his eyes. Then his gaze froze over with disapproval again. “As if causing your brother’s death hadn’t been bad enough.”

Hearthstone fumbled for his goblet. His fingers seemed to be made of clay. It took him three tries to stand the cup upright on the table. Spots of gold liquid made a trail across the back of his hand.

“Hearth.” I touched his arm. I signed: *I’m here.*

I couldn’t think of what else to say. I wanted him to know he wasn’t alone—that someone in this room cared for him. I thought about the runestone he’d showed me months ago—*perthro*, the sign of the empty cup, Hearth’s favorite symbol. Hearthstone had been drained by his childhood. He’d chosen to fill his life with rune magic and a new family—which included me. I wanted to yell at Mr. Alderman that Hearthstone was a better elf than his parents ever were.

But one thing I’d learned from being a son of Frey—I couldn’t always fight my friends’ battles. The best I could do was be there to heal their injuries.

Also, yelling at Mr. Alderman wouldn’t get us what we needed. Sure, I could summon Jack, bust into the display case, and just take the stone. But I was betting Mr. Alderman had some first-rate security. It wouldn’t do Blitzen any good to get healed only to be killed immediately by the Alfheim SWAT unit. I wasn’t even sure the stone would *work* properly if it wasn’t

given freely by its owner. Magic items had weird rules, especially ones named Skofnung.

“Mr. Alderman.” I tried to keep my voice even. “What do you want?”

He raised a platinum blond eyebrow. “Excuse me?”

“Aside from making your son feel miserable,” I added. “You’re really good at that. But you said helping us wouldn’t serve a purpose for you. What *would* make it worth your while?”

He smiled faintly. “Ah, a young man who understands business. From you, Magnus Chase, I don’t require much. You know the Vanir are our ancestral gods? Frey himself is our patron and lord. All of Alfheim was given to him as his teething gift when he was a child.”

“So...he chewed on you and spit you out?”

Mr. Alderman’s smile died. “My *point* is that a son of Frey would make a worthy friend for our family. All I would ask is that you stay with us for a while, perhaps attend a small reception...just a few hundred close associates. Show yourself, take a few photos with me for the press. That sort of thing.”

The gold drink started to leave a bad aftertaste in my mouth. Photos with Alderman sounded almost as painful as getting decapitated by a wire.

“You’re worried about your reputation,” I said. “You’re ashamed of your son, so you want *me* to bolster your street cred.”

Alderman’s big alien eyes narrowed, making them almost normal size. “I do not know this term *street cred*. But I believe we understand each other.”

“Oh, I understand you.” I glanced at Hearthstone for guidance, but he still looked unfocused, miserable. “So, Mr. Alderman, I do your little photo op, and you give us the stone?”

“Well, now...” Alderman took a long sip from his goblet. “I would expect something from my wayward son, as well. He has unfinished business here. He must atone. He must pay his *wergild*.”

“What’s a *wergild*?” I silently prayed it wasn’t like a werewolf.

“Hearthstone knows what I mean.” Alderman stared at his son. “Not a hair must show. You do what must be done—what you should have done years ago. While you work on that, your friend will be a guest in our house.”

“Wait,” I said. “How long are we talking about? We’ve got somewhere important to be in, like, less than four days.”

Mr. Alderman bared his white teeth again. “Well, then, Hearthstone had better hurry.” He rose and shouted, “Inge!”

The hulder scurried over, a dishrag in her hands.

“Provide for my son and his guest as needed,” said Mr. Alderman. “They will stay in Hearthstone’s old room. And Magnus Chase, do not think you can defy me. My house, my rules. Try to take the stone and, son of Frey or not, it won’t go well for you.”

He tossed his goblet on the floor, as if he couldn’t allow Hearthstone to have the most impressive spill.

“Clean that up,” he snapped at Inge. Then he stormed out of the room.



## TWENTY-FOUR

# Oh, You Wanted to Breathe? That'll Be an Extra Three Gold

HEARTHSTONE'S ROOM? More like Hearthstone's isolation chamber.

After cleaning up the spill (we insisted on helping), Inge led us up a wide staircase to the second floor, down a hall bedecked with lush tapestries and more artifact niches, to a simple metal door. She opened it with a big old-fashioned key, though doing so made her wince as if the door was hot.

"Apologies," she told us. "The house's locks are all made of iron. They're uncomfortable for sprites like me."

Judging from the clammy look on her face, I think she meant *torturous*. I guessed Mr. Alderman didn't want Inge unlocking too many doors—or maybe he just didn't care if she suffered.

Inside, the room was almost as large as my suite in Valhalla, but whereas my suite was designed to be everything I could want, this place was designed to be nothing Hearthstone would want. Unlike every other part of the house I'd seen, there were no windows. Rows of fluorescent lights glowed harshly overhead, providing all the ambiance of a discount-furniture store. On the floor in one corner lay a twin mattress covered in white sheets. No blanket, no comforter, no pillows. To the left, a doorway led to what I assumed was the bathroom. To the right, a closet stood open, revealing exactly one set of clothes: a white suit roughly Hearth's size but otherwise an exact match for the suit in the portrait of Andiron downstairs.

Mounted on the walls, classroom-size whiteboards displayed to-do lists written in neat block letters.

Some lists were in black:

YOUR OWN LAUNDRY, TWICE WEEKLY = +2 GOLD

SWEEP THE FLOORS, BOTH LEVELS = +2 GOLD

WORTHY TASKS = +5 GOLD

Others were in red:

EACH MEAL = -3 GOLD

ONE HOUR OF FREE TIME = -3 GOLD

EMBARRASSING FAILURES = -10 GOLD

I counted maybe a dozen lists like this, along with hundreds of motivational statements like: NEVER FORGET YOUR RESPONSIBILITY. STRIVE TO BE WORTHY. NORMALCY IS THE KEY TO SUCCESS.

I felt as if I were surrounded by towering adults all wagging their fingers at me, heaping shame, making me smaller and smaller. And I'd only been here for a minute. I couldn't imagine *living* here.

Even the Ten Commandments whiteboards weren't the strangest thing. Stretched across the floor was the furry blue hide of a large animal. Its head had been removed, but its four paws still had the claws attached—curved ivory barbs that would've made perfect fishing hooks for catching great white sharks. Strewn across the rug were gold coins—maybe two or three hundred of them, glittering like islands in a sea of thick blue fur.

Hearthstone set Blitzen down gently at the foot of the mattress. He scanned the whiteboards, his face a mask of anxiety, as if looking for his name on a list of exam scores.

"Hearth?" I was so shocked by the room I couldn't form a coherent question like, *Why?* or, *May I please kick your father's teeth in?*

He made one of the first signs he'd ever taught me—back on the streets, when he was teaching me how to stay out of trouble with the police. He crossed two fingers and ran them down his opposite palm like he was writing a ticket: *Rules*.

It took a moment for my hands to remember how to sign. *Your parents made these for you?*

*Rules*, he repeated. His face gave away little. I started to wonder if, earlier in his life, Hearthstone had smiled more, cried more, shown *any*

emotion more. Maybe he'd learned to be so careful with his expressions as a defense.

"But why the prices?" I asked. "It's like a menu...."

I stared at the gold coins glittering on the fur rug. "Wait, the coins were your allowance? Or...your *payment*? Why throw them on the rug?"

Inge stood quietly in the doorway, her face lowered. "It's the hide of the beast," she said, also signing the words. "The one that killed his brother."

My mouth tasted like rust. "Andiron?"

Inge nodded. She glanced behind her, probably worried that the master would appear out of nowhere. "It happened when Andiron was seven and Hearthstone was eight." As she spoke, she signed almost as fluently as Hearth, like she'd been practicing for years. "They were playing in the woods behind the house. There's an old well..." She hesitated, looking at Hearthstone for permission to say more.

Hearthstone shuddered.

*Andiron loved the well*, he signed. *He thought it granted wishes. But there was a bad spirit....*

He made a strange combination of signs: three fingers at the mouth—a W for water; then pointing down—the symbol for a well; then a V over one eye—the sign for taking a pee. (We used that one a lot on the streets, too.) Together, it looked like he was naming this bad spirit *Pees-in-the-Well*.

I frowned at Inge. "Did he just say—?"

"Yes," she confirmed. "That is the spirit's name. In the old language, it is called a *brunnmigi*. It came out of the well and attacked Andiron in the form of...that. A large bluish creature, a mixture of bear and wolf."

Always with the blue wolves. I hated them.

"It killed Andiron," I summed up.

In the fluorescent light, Hearthstone's face looked as petrified as Blitzen's. *I was playing with some stones*, he signed. *My back was turned. I didn't hear. I couldn't...*

He grasped at empty air.

"It wasn't your fault, Hearth," Inge said.

She looked so young with her clear blue eyes, her slightly pudgy rosy cheeks, her blond hair curling around the edges of her bonnet, but she spoke as if she'd seen the attack firsthand.

"Were you there?" I asked.

She blushed even more. “Not exactly. I was just a little girl, but my mother worked as Mr. Alderman’s servant. I—I remember Hearthstone running into the house crying, signing for help. He and Mr. Alderman rushed out again. And then, later...Mr. Alderman came back, carrying Master Andiron’s body.”

Her cow tail flicked, brushing the doorjamb. “Mr. Alderman killed the brunnmigi, but he made Hearthstone...skin the creature, all by himself. Hearthstone wasn’t allowed back inside until the job was done. Once the hide was cured and made into a rug, they put it in here.”

“Gods.” I paced the room. I tried to wipe some of the words off a whiteboard, but they were written in permanent marker. Of course they were.

“And the coins?” I asked. “The menu items?”

My voice came out harsher than I’d intended. Inge flinched.

“Hearthstone’s wergild,” she said. “The blood debt for his brother’s death.”

*Cover the rug, Hearthstone signed mechanically, as if quoting something he’d heard a million times. Earn gold coins until not a single hair can be seen. Then I have paid.*

I looked at the list of prices—the pluses and minuses of Hearthstone’s guilt ledger. I stared at the sprinkling of coins lost in an expanse of blue fur. I imagined eight-year-old Hearthstone trying to earn enough money to cover even the smallest portion of this huge rug.

I shivered, but I couldn’t shake off my anger. “Hearth, I thought your parents beat you or something. This is worse.”

Inge wrung her hands. “Oh, no, sir, beatings are only for the house staff. But you are right. Mr. Hearthstone’s punishment has been much more difficult.”

*Beatings.* Inge mentioned them as if they were unfortunate facts of life, like burned cookies or stopped-up sinks.

“I’m going to tear this place down,” I decided. “I’m going to throw your father—”

Hearthstone locked eyes with me. My anger backwashed in my throat. This wasn’t my call. This wasn’t my history. Still...

“Hearth, we can’t play his sick little game,” I said. “He wants you to complete this wergild before he helps us? That’s impossible! Sam’s supposed to marry a giant in four days. Can’t we just take the stone? Travel to another world before Alderman realizes?”

Hearth shook his head. *Stone must be a gift. Only works if given freely.*

“And there are guards,” Inge added. “Security spirits that...you don’t want to meet.”

I’d expected all of the above, but that didn’t stop me from cursing until Inge’s ears blushed.

“What about rune magic?” I asked. “Can you summon enough gold to cover the fur?”

*Wergild cannot be cheated,* Hearth signed. *Gold must be earned or won by some great effort.*

“That’ll take years!”

“Perhaps not,” Inge murmured, as if talking to the blue rug. “There is a way.”

Hearth turned to her. *How?*

Inge clasped her hands in agitation. I wasn’t sure if she was aware that she was making the sign for *marriage*. “I—I don’t mean to speak out of turn. But there is the Careful One.”

Hearth threw his hands up in the universal gesture for *Are you kidding me?* He signed: *Careful One is a legend.*

“No,” Inge said. “I know where he is.”

Hearth stared at her in dismay. *Even if. No. Too dangerous. Everyone who tries to rob him ends up dead.*

“Not everyone,” Inge said. “It would be dangerous, but you could do it, Hearth. I know you could.”

“Hold up,” I said. “Who’s the Careful One? What are you talking about?”

“There—there is a dwarf,” Inge said. “The only dwarf in Alfheim except for...” She nodded toward our petrified friend. “The Careful One has a hoard of gold large enough to cover this rug. I could tell you how to find him—if you don’t mind a fairly high chance that you’ll die.”



## TWENTY-FIVE

### Hearthstone? More Like *Hearthrob*. Am I Right?

YOU SHOULDN'T make a comment about imminent death and then say "Good night! We'll talk about it tomorrow!"

But Inge insisted we shouldn't go after the dwarf until the morning. She pointed out that we needed rest. She brought us extra clothes, food and drink, and a couple of pillows. Then she scurried off, maybe to clean up spills or dust artifact niches or pay Mr. Alderman five gold for the privilege of being his servant.

Hearth didn't want to talk about the killer dwarf Careful One or his gold. He didn't want to be consoled about his dead mother or his living father. After a quick gloomy meal, he signed, *Need sleep*, and promptly collapsed on his mattress.

Just out of spite, I decided to sleep on the rug. Sure, it was creepy, but how often do you get to recline on one hundred percent genuine Pees-in-the-Well fur?

Hearthstone had told me that the sun never set in Alfheim. It just sort of dipped to the horizon and came back up again, like in summer in the arctic. I'd wondered if I'd have trouble sleeping when there was no night. But I needn't have worried—here in Hearthstone's windowless room, one flick of the light switch left me in total darkness.

I'd had a long day, what with fighting democratic zombies and then getting dropped out of an airplane into the wealthy suburbs of Elitist-heim.

The evil creature's fur was surprisingly warm and comfortable. Before I knew it, I had drifted off into not-so-peaceful slumber.

Seriously, I don't know if there's a Norse god of dreams, but if there is, I'm going to find his house and hack apart his Sleep Number mattress with a battle-ax.

I got treated to a flurry of disturbing images, none of which made much sense. I saw my Uncle Randolph's ship listing in the storm, heard his daughters screaming from inside the wheelhouse. Sam and Amir—who had no business being there—clung to opposite sides of the deck, trying to reach each other's hands until a wave crashed over them and swept them out to sea.

The dream shifted. I saw Alex Fierro in her suite in Valhalla, throwing ceramic pots across the atrium. Loki stood in her bedroom, casually adjusting his paisley bow tie in the mirror as pots passed through him and smashed against the wall.

"It's such a simple request, Alex," he said. "The alternative will be unpleasant. Do you think because you're dead you have nothing left to lose? You are *very* wrong."

"Get out!" Alex screamed.

Loki turned, but he was no longer a *he*. The god had changed into a young woman with long red hair and dazzling eyes, an emerald green evening gown accentuating her figure. "Temper, temper, love," she purred. "Remember where you come from."

The words reverberated, shaking the scene apart.

I found myself in a cavern of bubbling sulfuric pools and thick stalagmites. The god Loki, wearing only a loincloth, lay lashed to three rock columns—his arms spread wide, his legs bound together, his ankles and wrists tied with glistening dark cords of calcified guts. Coiled around a stalactite above his head was a massive green serpent, jaws open, fangs dripping venom into the god's eyes. But instead of screaming, Loki was laughing as his face burned. "Soon enough, Magnus!" he called. "Don't forget your wedding invitation!"

A different scene: a mountainside in Jotunheim in the middle of a blizzard. At the summit stood the god Thor, his red beard and shaggy hair flecked with ice, his eyes blazing. In his thick fur cloak, with his hide clothes dusted with snow, he looked like the Abominable Ginger Snowman. Coming up the slope to kill him were a thousand giants—an army of muscle-bound

gargantuans in armor fashioned from slabs of stone, their spears the size of redwood trees.

With his gauntlets, Thor raised his hammer—the mighty Mjolnir. Its head was a slab of iron shaped roughly like a flattened circus tent, blunt on both ends and pointed in the middle. Runic designs swirled across the metal. In the god's double-fisted grip, Mjolnir's handle looked so stubby it was almost comical, like he was a child raising a weapon much too heavy for him. The army of giants laughed and jeered.

Then Thor brought down the hammer. At his feet, the side of the mountain exploded. Giants went flying in a million-ton maelstrom of rock and snow, lightning crackling through their ranks, hungry tendrils of energy burning them to ashes.

The chaos subsided. Thor glowered down at the thousand dead enemies now littering the slopes. Then he looked directly at me.

“You think I can do that with a *staff*, Magnus Chase?” he bellowed.  
“HURRY UP WITH THAT HAMMER!”

Then, being Thor, he lifted his right leg and farted a thunderclap.

The next morning, Hearthstone shook me awake.

I felt like I'd been bench-pressing Mjolnir all night, but I managed to stumble into the shower, then dress myself in elfish linen and denim. I had to roll up the sleeves and cuffs about sixteen times to make them fit.

I wasn't sure about leaving Blitzen behind, but Hearthstone decided that our friend would be safer here than where we were going. We set him on the mattress and tucked him in. Then the two of us crept out of the house, thankfully without encountering Mr. Alderman.

Inge had agreed to meet us at the back edge of the estate. We found her waiting where the well-kept lawn met a gnarled line of trees and undergrowth. The sun was on the rise again, turning the sky blood orange. Even with my sunglasses on, my eyeballs were screaming in pain. Stupid beautiful sunrise in stupid Elf World.

“I don't have long,” Inge fretted. “I bought a ten-minute break from the master.”

That made me angry all over again. I wanted to ask how much it would cost to buy ten minutes of stomping Mr. Alderman with cleats, but I figured I shouldn't waste Inge's valuable time.

She pointed to the woods. “Andvari’s lair is in the river. Follow the current downstream to the waterfall. He dwells in the pool at its base.”

“Andvari?” I asked.

She nodded uneasily. “That is his name—the Careful One, in the old language.”

“And this dwarf lives underwater?”

“In the shape of a fish,” said Inge.

“Oh. Naturally.”

Hearthstone signed to Inge: *How do you know this?*

“I...well, Master Hearthstone, hulder still have some nature magic. We’re not supposed to use it, but—I sensed the dwarf the last time I was in the woods. Mr. Alderman only tolerates this patch of wilderness on his property because...you know, hulder need a forest nearby to survive. And he can always...hire more help in there.”

She said *hire*. I heard *catch*.

The ten-minute cleat-stomping session was sounding better and better.

“So this dwarf...” I said, “what’s he doing in Alfheim? Doesn’t the sunlight turn him to stone?”

Inge’s cow tail flicked. “According to the rumors I’ve heard, Andvari is over a thousand years old. He has powerful magic. The sunlight barely affects him. Also, he stays in the darkest depths of the pool. I—I suppose he thought Alfheim was a safe place to hide. His gold has been stolen before, by dwarves, humans, even gods. But who would look for a dwarf and his treasure here?”

*Thank you, Inge*, Hearth signed.

The hulder blushed. “Just be careful, Master Hearth. Andvari is tricky. His treasure is sure to be hidden and protected by all sorts of enchantments. I’m sorry I can only tell you where to find him, not how to defeat him.”

Hearthstone gave Inge a hug. I was afraid the poor girl’s bonnet might pop off like a bottle cap.

“I—please—good luck!” She dashed off.

I turned to Hearthstone. “Has she been in love with you since you were kids?”

Hearth pointed at me, then circled his finger at the side of his head. *You’re crazy.*

“Whatever, man,” I said. “I’m just glad you didn’t kiss her. She would’ve passed out.”

Hearthstone gave me an irritated grunt. *Come on. Dwarf to rob.*



## TWENTY-SIX

### We Nuke All the Fish

I HAD trekked through the wilderness of Jotunheim. I had lived on the streets of Boston. Somehow the swath of uncultivated land behind the Alderman Manor seemed even more dangerous.

Glancing behind us, I could still see the house's towers peeking above the woods. I could hear traffic from the road. The sun shone down as glaringly cheerful as usual. But under the gnarled trees, the gloom was tenacious. The roots and rocks seemed determined to trip me. In the upper branches, birds and squirrels gave me the stink eye. It was as if this little patch of nature were trying doubly hard to stay wild in order to avoid getting turned into a tea garden.

*If I even see you bringing a croquet set up in here, the trees seemed to say, I will make you eat the mallets.*

I appreciated the attitude, but it made our stroll a little nerve-racking.

Hearthstone seemed to know where he was going. The thought of Andiron and him playing in these woods as boys gave me new respect for their courage. After picking our way through a few acres of thornbushes, we emerged in a small clearing with a cairn of stones in the center.

“What is that?” I asked.

Hearthstone’s expression was tight and painful, as if he were still forging through the briar. He signed, *The well*.

The melancholy of the place seeped into my pores. This was the spot where his brother had died. Mr. Alderman must have filled in the well—or

maybe he had forced Hearthstone to do it after he'd finished skinning the evil creature. The act had probably earned Hearth a couple of gold coins.

I circled my fist over my chest, the sign for *I'm sorry*.

Hearth stared at me as if the sentiment did not compute. He knelt next to the cairn and picked up a small flat stone from the top. Engraved on it in dark red was a rune:



Othala. *Inheritance*. The same symbol Randolph's little girl Emma had been clutching in my dream. Seeing it in real life, I felt seasick all over again. My face burned with the memory of Randolph's scar.

I recalled what Loki had said in the wight's tomb: *Blood is a powerful thing. I can always find you through him*. For a second, I wondered if Loki had somehow put the rune here as a message for me, but Hearthstone didn't seem surprised to find it.

I knelt next to him and signed, *Why is that here?*

Hearthstone pointed to himself. He set the stone carefully back on top of the pile.

*Means home*, he signed. *Or what is important.*

*"Inheritance?"*

He considered for a moment, then nodded. *I put it here when I left, years ago. This rune I will not use. It belongs with him.*

I stared at the pile of rocks. Were some of these the same ones that eight-year-old Hearthstone had been playing with when the monster attacked his brother? This place was more than a memorial for Andiron. Part of Hearthstone had died here, too.

I was no magician, but it seemed wrong for a set of runestones to be missing one symbol. How could you master a language—especially the language of the universe—without all the letters?

I wanted to encourage Hearth to take back the rune. Surely Andiron would want that. Hearth had a new family now. He was a great sorcerer. His cup of life had been refilled.

But Hearthstone avoided my eyes. It's easy not to heed someone when you're deaf. You simply don't look at them. He rose and walked on,

gesturing for me to follow.

A few minutes later, we found the river. It wasn't impressive—just a swampy creek like the one that meandered through the Fenway greenbelt. Clouds of mosquitos hovered over marsh grass. The ground was like warm bread pudding. We followed the current downstream through thick patches of bramble and bog up to our knees. The thousand-year-old dwarf Andvari had picked a lovely place to retire.

After last night's dreams, my nerves were raw.

I kept thinking about Loki bound in his cave. And his appearance in Alex Fierro's suite: *It's such a simple request*. If that had actually happened, what did Loki want?

I remembered the assassin, the goat-killer who liked to possess flight instructors. He'd told me to bring Alex to Jotunheim: *SHE IS NOW YOUR ONLY HOPE FOR SUCCESS*. That did not bode well.

Three days from now, the giant Thrym expected a wedding. He would want his bride, as well as a bride-price of the Skofnung Sword and Stone. In exchange, maybe, we would get back Thor's hammer and prevent hordes of Jotunheim from invading Boston.

I thought about the thousand giants I'd seen in my dream, marching into battle to challenge Thor. I wasn't anxious to face such a force—not without a big hammer that could explode mountains and fry invading armies into sizzly bits.

I guessed what Hearth and I were doing now made sense: trudging through Alfheim, trying to retrieve gold from some old dwarf so we could get the Skofnung Stone and heal Blitz. Still...I felt as if Loki was intentionally keeping us sidetracked, not giving us time to think. He was like a point guard waving his hands in our faces, distracting us from shooting for the net. There was more to this wedding deal than getting Thor's hammer back. Loki had a plan within a plan. He'd recruited my Uncle Randolph for some reason. If only I could find a moment to gather my thoughts without being pulled from one life-threatening problem to another....

*Yeah, right. You have just described your entire life and afterlife, Magnus.*

I tried to tell myself everything would be fine. Unfortunately, my esophagus didn't believe me. It kept yo-yoing up and down from my chest to my teeth.

The first waterfall we found was a gentle trickle over a mossy ledge. Open meadows stretched out on either bank. The water wasn't deep enough for a fish to hide in. The meadows were too flat to conceal effective traps like poison spikes, land mines, or trip wires that launched dynamite or rabid rodents from catapults. No self-respecting dwarf would've hidden his treasure here. We kept walking.

The *second* waterfall had potential. The terrain was rockier, with lots of slippery moss and treacherous crevices between the boulders on either bank. The overhanging trees shaded the water and provided ample potential hiding places for crossbows or guillotine blades. The river itself cascaded down a natural stairwell of rock before tumbling ten feet into a pond the diameter of a trampoline. With all the churning froth and ripples, I couldn't see below the surface, but judging from the dark blue water, it must've been deep.

"There could be anything down there," I told Hearth. "How do we do this?"

Hearthstone gestured toward my pendant. *Be ready.*

"Uh, okay." I pulled off my runestone and summoned Jack.

"Hey, guys!" he said. "Whoa! We're in Alfheim! Did you bring sunglasses for me?"

"Jack, you don't have eyes," I reminded him.

"Yeah, but still, I look great in sunglasses! What are we doing?"

I told him the basics while Hearthstone rummaged through his bag of runestones, trying to decide which flavor of magic to use on a dwarf/fish.

"Andvari?" Jack said. "Oh, I've heard of that guy. You can steal his gold, but don't kill him. That would be really bad luck."

"Meaning what, exactly?"

Swords could not shrug, but Jack tilted from side to side, which was his closest equivalent. "I dunno what would happen. I just know it's right up there on the things-you-don't-do list, along with breaking mirrors, crossing paths with Freya's cats, and trying to kiss Frigg under the mistletoe. Boy, I made that mistake once!"

I had the horrible feeling Jack was about to tell me the story. Then Hearthstone raised a runestone over his head. I just had time to recognize the symbol:



*Thurisaz*: the rune of Thor.

Hearthstone slammed it into the pond.

**KA-BLAM!** Water vapor coated my sunglasses. The atmosphere turned to pure steam and ozone so fast, my sinuses inflated like car air bags.

I wiped off my lenses. Where the pond had been, a huge muddy pit went down thirty feet. At the bottom, dozens of surprised fish flailed around, their gills flapping.

“Whoa,” I said. “Where did the waterfall...?”

I looked up. The river arched over our heads like a liquid rainbow, bypassing the pond and crashing into the riverbed downstream.

“Hearth, how the heck—?”

He turned to me, and I took a nervous step back. His eyes blazed with anger. His expression was scarier and even less Hearth-like than when he’d *uruzed* himself into Ox Elf.

“Uh, just saying, man...” I raised my hands. “You nuked about fifty innocent fish.”

*One of them is a dwarf*, he signed.

He jumped into the pit, his boots sinking into the mud. He waded around, pulling out his feet with deep sucking noises, examining each fish. Above me, the river continued to arc through midair, roaring and glittering in the sunlight.

“Jack,” I said, “what does the thurisaz rune do?”

“It’s the rune of Thor, *señor*. Hey—*Thor, señor*. That rhymes!”

“Yeah, great. But, uh, why did the pond go boom? Why is Hearthstone acting so weird?”

“Oh! Because thurisaz is the rune of destructive force. Like Thor. Blowing stuff up. Also, when you invoke it, you can get a little... Thor-like.”

*Thor-like*. Just what I needed. Now I really didn’t want to jump into that hole. If Hearthstone started farting like the thunder god, the air down there was going to get toxic real fast.

On the other hand, I couldn’t leave those fish at the mercy of an angry elf. Sure, they were just fish. But I didn’t like the idea of so many dying just so we could weed out one disguised dwarf. Life was life. I guess it was a

Frey thing. I also figured Hearthstone might feel bad about it once he shook off the influence of thurisaz.

“Jack, stay here,” I said. “Keep watch.”

“Which would be easier and cooler with sunglasses,” Jack complained.

I ignored him and leaped in.

At least Hearth didn’t try to kill me when I dropped down next to him. I looked around but saw no sign of treasure—no X’s marking the spot, no trapdoors, just a bunch of gasping fish.

*How do we find Andvari?* I signed. *The other fish need water to breathe.*

*We wait,* Hearth signed. *Dwarf will suffocate too unless he changes form.*

I didn’t like that answer. I crouched and rested my hands on the mud, sending out the power of Frey through the slime and the muck. I know that sounds weird, but I figured if I could heal with a touch, intuiting everything that was wrong inside someone’s body, maybe I could extend my perception a little more—the same way you might squint to see farther—and sense all the different life-forms around me.

It worked, more or less. My mind touched the cold panicked consciousness of a trout flopping a few inches away. I located an eel that had burrowed into the mud and was seriously considering biting Hearthstone in the foot (I convinced him not to). I touched the tiny minds of guppies whose entire thought process was *Eek! Eek! Eek!* Then I sensed something different—a grouper whose thoughts were racing a little too fast, like he was calculating escape plans.

I snatched him up with my einherji reflexes. The grouper yelled, “GAK!”

“Andvari, I presume? Nice to meet you.”

“LET ME GO!” wailed the fish. “My treasure is not in this pond! Actually, I don’t have a treasure! Forget I said that!”

“Hearth, how ’bout we get out of here?” I suggested. “Let the pond fill up again.”

The fire suddenly went out of Hearthstone’s eyes. He staggered.

From above, Jack yelled, “Uh, Magnus? You might want to hurry.”

The rune magic was fading. The arc of water started to dissolve, breaking into droplets. Keeping one hand tight on my captive grouper, I wrapped my other arm around Hearthstone’s waist and leaped straight up with all my strength.

Kids, do not try this at home. I'm a trained einherji who died a painful death, went to Valhalla, and now spends most of his time arguing with a sword. I am a qualified professional who can jump out of thirty-foot-deep muddy holes. You, I hope, are not.

I landed on the riverbank just as the waterfall collapsed back into the pond, granting all the little fishies a very wet miracle and a story to tell their grandchildren.

The grouper tried to wriggle free. "Let me go, you scoundrel!"

"Counterproposal," I said. "Andvari, this is my friend Jack, the Sword of Summer. He can cut through almost anything. He sings pop songs like a demented angel. He can also fillet a fish faster than you would believe. I'm about to ask Jack to do all of those things at once—or you can turn into your normal form, slow and easy, and we can have a chat."

In two blinks, instead of holding a fish, my hand was wrapped around the throat of the oldest, slimiest dwarf I'd ever seen. He was so disgusting that the fact I didn't let go should've proven my bravery and gotten me into Valhalla all over again.

"Congratulations," the dwarf croaked. "You got me. And now you're gonna get a tragic demise!"



## Let Me Go Immediately, or I Will Make You a Billionaire

### OOH, A DEMISE!

Normally I am not threatened with a *demise*. Most folks in the Nine Worlds don't use fancy words like that. They just say "IMMA KILL YOU!" Or they let their chain-mail-wrapped fists do the talking.

I was so impressed with Andvari's vocabulary, I squeezed his throat tighter.

"Ack!" The dwarf thrashed and wriggled. He was slippery, but not heavy. Even by dwarf standards, the dude was tiny. He wore a fish-skin tunic and underwear that was basically a moss diaper. Slime coated his limbs. His stubby arms hammered away at me, but it didn't feel any worse than getting hit with Nerf bats. And his face...well, you know how your thumb looks after it's been under a wet bandage too long—all wrinkly and discolored and gross? Imagine that as a face, with some scraggly white whiskers and mold-green eyes, and you've got Andvari.

"Where's the gold?" I demanded. "Don't make me unleash my sword's playlist."

Andvari writhed even more. "You fools don't want my gold! Don't you know what happens to people who take it?"

"They get rich?" I guessed.

"No! Well, yes. But after that, they die! Or...at least they *want* to die. They always suffer. And so does everyone around them!" He wiggled his

slimy fingers like, *Woo, woo, threatening!*

Hearthstone was listing slightly to port, but he managed to stay on his feet. He signed: *One person stole gold, no consequences.* Then he made my least favorite name sign: index finger and thumb pinched together at the side of his head, a combination of the letter *L* and the sign for *devil*, which fit our friend Loki just fine.

“Loki took your gold once,” I interpreted, “and *he* didn’t die or suffer.”

“Well, yeah, but that’s Loki!” Andvari said. “Everybody else who got the gold after him—they went crazy! They had horrible lives, left a trail of dead bodies! Is that what you want? You want to be like Fafnir? Sigurd? The Powerball lottery winners?”

“The who?”

“Oh, come on! You’ve heard the stories. Every time I lose my ring, it bounces around the Nine Worlds for a while. Some schmuck gets ahold of it. They win the lottery and make millions. But they always end up broke, divorced, sick, unhappy, and/or dead. Is that what you want?”

Hearth signed: *Magic ring, yes. That’s the secret of his wealth. We need that.*

“You mentioned a ring,” I said.

Andvari went still. “Did I? Nope. Must have misspoken. No ring.”

“Jack,” I said, “how do his feet look to you?”

“Real bad, *señor*. They need a pedicure.”

“Do it.”

Jack flew into action. It’s a rare sword that can remove caked-on pond scum, shave off calluses, trim gnarly toenails, and leave a pair of dwarf feet shiny clean without 1) killing said dwarf, 2) cutting off the flailing feet of said dwarf, or 3) cutting off the legs of the einherji who is holding said dwarf...and all the while singing “Can’t Feel My Face.” Jack is truly special.

“All right! All right!” Andvari shrieked. “No more torture! I’ll show you where the treasure is! It’s right under that rock!”

He pointed frantically to pretty much everything until his finger came to rest at a boulder near the edge of the waterfall.

*Traps*, Hearthstone signed.

“Andvari,” I said, “if I move that boulder, what sort of traps will I spring?”

“None!”

“What if I move it using your head as a lever, then?”

“All right, it’s booby-trapped! Exploding hexes! Trip wires to catapults!”

“I knew it,” I said. “How do you disarm them? All of them.”

The dwarf squinted with concentration. At least I *hoped* that’s what he was doing. Otherwise he was making a deposit in his moss diaper.

“It’s done.” He sighed miserably. “I’ve disarmed all the traps.”

I glanced at Hearthstone. The elf stretched out his hands, probably testing our surroundings for magic the way I could sense eels and guppies. (Hey, we all have different talents.)

Hearth nodded. *Safe*.

With Andvari still dangling from my hand, I walked to the boulder and flipped it over with my foot. (Einherji strength is also a good talent.)

Under the rock, a canvas-lined pit was filled with...Wow. I didn’t usually care about money. I’m not about that. But my saliva glands went into overdrive when I saw the sheer volume of gold—bracelets, necklaces, coins, daggers, rings, cups, Monopoly tokens. I wasn’t sure what the value of gold per ounce was these days, but I estimated I was looking at about a gajillion dollars’ worth, give or take a bazillion.

Jack squealed. “Oh, look at those little daggers! They’re *adorable*.”

Hearthstone’s eyes regained their alertness. All that gold seemed to have the same effect on him as waving a cup of coffee under his nose.

*Too easy*, he signed. *Must be a catch*.

“Andvari,” I said, “if your name means *Careful One*, why are you so easy to rob?”

“I know!” he sobbed. “I’m *not* careful! I get robbed all the time! I think the name is ironic. My mother was a cruel woman.”

“So this hoard keeps getting stolen, but you keep getting it back? Because of that ring you mentioned?”

“What ring? Lots of rings in that pile. Take them!”

“No, the super-magic one. Where is it?”

“Um, probably in the pile somewhere. Go look!” Andvari quickly pulled a ring off his finger and slipped it into his diaper. His hands were so filthy I wouldn’t have noticed the ring at all if he hadn’t tried to hide it.

“You just dropped it down your pants,” I said.

“No, I didn’t!”

“Jack, I think this dwarf wants a full Brazilian waxing.”

“No!” Andvari wailed. “All right, yes, my magic ring is in my pants. But *please* don’t take it. Getting it back is always such a hassle. I *told* you, it’s

cursed. You don't want to end up like a lottery winner, do you?"

I turned to Hearth. "What do you think?"

"Tell him, Mr. Elf!" said Andvari. "You're obviously an elf of learning. You know your runes. I bet you know the story of Fafnir, eh? Tell your friend this ring will bring you nothing but trouble."

Hearth gazed into the distance as if reading a list on some heavenly whiteboard: -10 GOLD FOR BRINGING HOME A CURSED RING. +10 GAJILLION GOLD FOR STEALING A GAJILLION GOLD.

He signed, *Ring is cursed. But also key to treasure. Without ring, treasure will never be enough. Will always come up short.*

I looked at the Jacuzzi-size stash of gold. "I don't know, man. That seems like plenty to cover your wergild rug."

Hearth shook his head. *It will not be. Ring is dangerous. But we have to take it just in case. If we don't use it, we can return it.*

I twisted the dwarf to face me. "Sorry, Andvari."

Jack laughed. "Hey, that rhymes, too!"

"What did the elf say?" Andvari demanded. "I can't read those gestures!" He waved his grubby hands, accidentally signing *donkey waiter pancake* in ASL.

I was losing patience with the old slime-bucket, but I did my best to translate Hearth's message.

Andvari's moss green eyes darkened. He bared his teeth, which looked like they hadn't been flossed since zombies inspired the Mayflower Compact.

"You're a fool, then, Mr. Elf," he growled. "The ring will come back to me eventually. It always does. In the meantime, it will cause death and misery to whoever wears it. And don't think it will solve your problems, either. This won't be the last time you have to come home. You've only delayed a much more dangerous reckoning."

The change in Andvari's tone unnerved me even more than his change from grouper to dwarf. No more wailing or crying. He spoke with cold certainty, like a hangman explaining the mechanics of a noose.

Hearthstone didn't look rattled. He wore the same expression he'd had at his brother's cairn—as if he was reliving a tragedy that had happened long ago and couldn't be changed.

*The ring,* he signed.

The gesture was so obvious even Andvari understood it.

“Fine.” The dwarf glared at me. “You won’t escape the curse either, human. Soon enough you’ll see what comes of stolen gifts!”

The hairs on my arms stood up. “What do you mean?”

He grinned evilly. “Oh, nothing. Nothing at all.”

Andvari did the shimmy-shimmy-shake. The ring dropped out the leg hole of his diaper. “One magic ring,” he announced, “complete with curse.”

“There is no way,” I said, “that I am picking that up.”

“Got it!” Jack dove in and made like a spatula, scooping the ring out of the mud with the flat of his blade.

Andvari watched wistfully as my sword played paddleball, flipping the ring from one side of his blade to the other.

“The usual deal?” the dwarf asked. “You spare my life and take everything I own?”

“The usual sounds great,” I said. “What about all the gold in the pit? How do we carry it?”

Andvari scoffed. “Amateurs! The canvas lining of the pit is a big magical sack. Pull the drawstring and voila! I have to keep the stash ready for quick getaways for those *few* times I avoid getting robbed.”

Hearthstone crouched next to the pit. Sure enough, poking from a hole in the hem of the canvas was a loop of string. Hearth pulled it and the bag snapped closed, shrinking to the size of a backpack. Hearth held it up for me to see—a gajillion dollars’ worth of gold in a superconvenient carry-on size.

“Now honor your part of the deal!” Andvari demanded.

I dropped him.

“Humph.” The old dwarf rubbed his neck. “Enjoy your demise, amateurs. I hope you have pain and suffering and win two lotteries!”

With that vile curse, he jumped back into his pond and disappeared.

“Hey, *señor!*” called Jack. “Heads up!”

“Don’t you dare—”

He flipped the ring at me. I caught it out of reflex. “Aww, gross.”

Seeing as it was a magic ring, I half expected some big *Lord of the Rings* moment when it landed in my hand—cold heavy whispering, swirling gray mist, a line of Nazgûl doing the Watusi. None of that happened. The ring just sat there, looking very much like a gold ring, albeit one that had recently fallen from a thousand-year-old dwarf’s moss diaper.

I slipped the ring into my pants pocket, then studied the circle of slime residue on my palm. “My hand will never feel clean again.”

Hearthstone shouldered his expensive new backpack like Gajillionaire Santa Claus. He glanced at the sun, which was already past its zenith. I hadn't realized just how long we'd been trekking through the wilds of Mr. Alderman's backyard.

*We should go,* Hearth signed. *Father will be waiting.*



## TWENTY-EIGHT

# And If You Order Now, You Also Get This Cursed Ring!

FATHER WAS waiting, all right. He paced in the living room, sipping golden juice from a silver goblet while Inge stood nearby waiting for a spill to happen.

When we walked in, Mr. Alderman turned toward us, his face a mask of cold anger. “Where have you—?”

His isosceles jaw dropped.

I guess he didn’t expect to see us soaked in sweat, covered in grass and twigs, our slime-caked shoes leaving slug trails across his white marble floor. Mr. Alderman’s expression was one of the best rewards I’d ever gotten, right up there with dying and going to Valhalla.

Hearthstone plopped his canvas bag on the floor with a muffled clatter. He signed: *Payment*—palm up, brushing one finger toward his dad like he was flicking a coin at him. The way Hearth did it made it look like an insult. I liked that.

Mr. Alderman forgot that he wasn’t supposed to acknowledge sign language. He asked, “*Payment?* But how—?”

“Come upstairs and we’ll show you.” I glanced behind Alderman, where Inge stood wide-eyed, a grin slowly spreading across her face. “We’ve got a demon-skin rug to cover.”

Ah, the sound of golden Monopoly tokens cascading across a fur rug... There is nothing sweeter, I promise you. Hearthstone tipped over the canvas

sack and walked around the rug, hosing it down with a torrent of wealth. Mr. Alderman's face got paler. In the doorway, Inge jumped up and down, clapping with excitement, heedless of the fact that she hadn't paid her master for the privilege.

When the last of the gold was out, Hearthstone stepped back and threw down the empty bag. He signed, *Wergild paid*.

Mr. Alderman looked stunned. He did not say *Good job, son!* Or *Oh, boy, I'm richer!* Or *Did you rob the Elfish Treasury Department?*

He crouched and inspected the pile, coin by coin, dagger by dagger. "There are miniature dogs and steam trains," he noted. "Why?"

I coughed. "I think the, uh, previous owner liked board games. Solid-gold board games."

"Hmm." Alderman continued his inspection, making sure that the entire rug was covered. His expression turned more and more sour. "Did you leave the property to acquire this? Because I did not give you permission—"

"Nope," I said. "You own the wilderness behind the backyard, right?"

"Yes, he does!" Inge said. The master glared at her, and she hastily added, "Because, ah, Mr. Alderman is a *very* important man."

"Look, sir," I said, "it's obvious Hearthstone succeeded. The rug is covered. Just admit it."

"I will be the judge!" he snarled. "This is all about *responsibility*, something you younger folks do not understand."

"You *want* Hearthstone to fail, don't you?"

Alderman scowled. "I *expect* him to fail. There is a difference. This boy earned his punishment. I am not convinced he has the potential to pay it off."

I almost screamed, *Hearthstone has been paying his entire life!* I wanted to pour Andvari's treasure straight down Alderman's throat and see if that convinced him of his son's potential.

Hearthstone brushed his fingers against my arm. He signed, *Calm. Ready with the ring.*

I tried to control my breathing. I didn't understand how Hearth could endure his father's insults. He'd had a lot of practice, sure, but the old elf was intolerable. I was glad Jack was back in pendant form, because I would've ordered him to give Mr. Alderman the full Brazilian treatment.

In the pocket of my jeans, Andvari's ring was so light I could barely feel it. I had to resist the urge to check on it every few seconds. I realized that was one reason I felt so irritated with Mr. Alderman. I wanted him to say

that the debt was paid. I didn't want Hearthstone to be right about needing the ring, too.

I kind of wanted to keep it. No, wait. That's not right. I wanted to return it to Andvari so we didn't have to deal with the curse. My thoughts on the subject were starting to get muddled, as though my head was full of river sludge.

"Aha!" Mr. Alderman cried triumphantly. He pointed to the top of rug, at the nape of its neck, where the fur was thickest. A single blue hair sprouted from the treasure like a stubborn weed.

"Oh, come on," I said. "That'll just take a minor adjustment."

I shifted the treasure so the hair was covered. But as soon as I succeeded, another hair popped up from the spot where I'd taken the gold. It was like the same stupid blue hair was following me around, defying my efforts.

"This is no problem," I insisted. "Let me get out my sword. Or, if you have a pair of scissors—"

"The debt is *not* paid!" Mr. Alderman insisted. "Unless you can cover that last hair right now, with more gold, I am going to charge you for disappointing me and wasting my time. Say...half this treasure."

Hearthstone turned to me—no surprise in his face, just glum resignation.  
*The ring.*

A wave of murderous resentment washed over me. I didn't want to give up the ring. But then I looked at the whiteboards around the room: all the rules and menu items, all the expectations that Mr. Alderman expected Hearthstone *not* to meet. The curse of Andvari's ring was pretty strong. It whispered to me, telling me to keep it and get filthy rich. But the urge to see Hearthstone free of his father, reunited with Blitzen, and out of this toxic house...that was stronger.

I brought out our secret last bit of treasure.

A hungry light kindled in Mr. Alderman's space-alien eyes. "Very well. Place it on the pile."

*Father,* Hearthstone signed. *Warning: the ring is cursed.*

"I will not listen to your hand gestures!"

"You know what he's saying." I held up the ring. "This thing taints whoever owns it. It'll ruin you. Heck, I've only had it for a few minutes and it's already messing with my mind. Take the gold that's already on the rug. Call the debt paid. Show some forgiveness, and we'll return this ring to its previous owner."

Mr. Alderman laughed bitterly. “*Forgiveness*? What can I buy with forgiveness? Will it bring Andiron back to me?”

Personally, I would’ve punched the old dude in the face, but Hearthstone stepped toward his father. He looked genuinely worried. *Curse of F-A-F-N-I-R*, he signed. *Do not*.

Andvari had mentioned that name. It sounded vaguely familiar, but I couldn’t place it. Maybe Fafnir was a Powerball lottery winner?

Hearthstone gestured *please*—hand flat against the chest, making a circle. It struck me that *please* was just a more relaxed, less angry version of *sorry*.

The two elves stared at each across the pile of gold. I could almost feel Alfheim swaying in the branches of the World Tree. Despite everything Alderman had done to him, Hearthstone still wanted to help his father...he was making one last effort to pull his dad out of a hole much deeper than Andvari’s.

“No,” Mr. Alderman decided. “Pay the wergild or stay in my debt—*both* of you.”

Hearthstone bowed his head in defeat. He motioned at me to give up the ring.

“First the Skofnung Stone,” I said. “Let me see that you’re keeping your side of the bargain.”

Alderman grunted. “Inge, bring the Skofnung Stone from its case. The security code is *Greta*.”

Hearthstone flinched. I guessed Greta was his mother’s name.

The hulder scurried off.

For a few tense moments, Hearthstone, Alderman, and I stood around the rug and stared at each other. No one suggested a game of Monopoly. No one yelled “Yippee!” and jumped in the pile of gold (though I’ll admit I was tempted).

Finally, Inge came back, the blue-gray whetstone cupped in her hands. She offered it to Alderman with a curtsey.

Alderman took it and handed it to his son. “I give this to you freely, Hearthstone, to do with as you please. Let its powers be yours.” He glowered at me. “Now, the ring.”

I was out of reasons to delay, but it was still difficult. With a deep breath, I knelt and added Andvari’s ring to the treasure, covering the last bit of fur.

“The deal is done,” I said.

“Eh?” Alderman’s gaze was fixed on the treasure. “Yes, yes, except for one thing. You promised me media exposure, Magnus Chase. I have arranged a little party for tonight. Inge!”

The hulder jumped. “Yes, sir! Preparations are coming along. All four hundred guests have RSVP’d.”

“*Four hundred?*” I asked. “How did you have time to set that up? How did you know we’d succeed?”

“Ha!” The crazy light in Mr. Alderman’s eyes did not calm my nerves. “I didn’t know you’d succeed, and I didn’t care. I planned on arranging parties *every* night while you stayed here, Magnus, preferably forever. But since you have paid the wergild so quickly, we’ll have to make tonight count. As for how, I am Alderman of House Alderman. No one would dare turn down my invitation!”

Behind his back, Inge gave me a frantic nod and drew a line across her neck.

“And now...” Mr. Alderman snatched the cursed ring out of the hoard. He placed it on his finger and held it out to admire it like someone newly engaged. “Yes, this will look *lovely* with my formal attire. Hearthstone, I will expect you and your guest—*Hearthstone*, where are you going?”

Apparently Hearth had had enough of his father. With the Skofnung Stone in one hand, he hauled Blitzen upright by the scarf harness and lugged him into the bathroom.

A moment later, I heard the shower running.

“I, uh, should go help them,” I said.

“What?” Alderman snapped. “Yes, fine. Such a *lovely* ring. Inge, make sure our young scoundrels are dressed appropriately for the party, and send some of the staff to help me with this gold. I must have every piece of treasure weighed and counted. And polished! It will look wonderful polished. And while you’re at it...”

I didn’t want to leave Inge alone in the same room with Mr. Crazy Ring, but I was getting nauseated watching Alderman flirt with his fortune. I ran to join my friends in the bathroom.

The only thing more disturbing than a severed god’s head in your bubble bath? A bleeding granite dwarf in your shower.

Hearth propped Blitzen under the showerhead. As soon as the running water cascaded over Blitz’s head, his form began to soften. His cold gray

face darkened into warm brown flesh. Blood flowed from his wounded gut and swirled around the drain. His knees buckled. I lurched into the stall to hold him up.

Hearthstone fumbled with the Skofnung Stone. He pressed it against the gushing wound and Blitz gasped. The flow of blood stopped instantly.

“I’m a goner!” Blitz croaked. “Don’t worry about me, you crazy elf! Just —” He spit out water. “Why is it raining?”

Hearthstone hugged him fiercely, crushing Blitz’s face against his chest.

“Hey!” Blitz complained. “Can’t breathe here!”

Hearth, of course, couldn’t hear him and didn’t seem to care. He rocked back and forth with the dwarf in his arms.

“Okay, buddy.” Blitz patted him weakly. “There, there.” He looked up at me and silently asked several thousand questions with his eyes, including: *Why are the three of us taking a shower together? Why am I not dead? Why do you smell like pond scum? What is wrong with my elf?*

Once we were sure he’d fully un-petrified, Hearth shut off the water. Blitzen was too weak to move, so we slid him into a sitting position right there in the shower.

Inge rushed into the bathroom with a stack of towels and some fresh clothes. From Hearth’s bedroom came the sound of spilling coins, like a dozen slot machines paying out, punctuated by the occasional crazy laugh.

“You might want to take your time in here,” Inge warned us, glancing nervously behind her. “It’s a bit...hectic out there.” Then she left, closing the door behind her.

We did our best to get ourselves cleaned up. I used an extra belt to make a strap for the Skofnung Stone and tied it around my waist, tucking my shirt over it so it wouldn’t be too obvious if Mr. Alderman got a case of takesy-backsies.

Blitzen’s wound had closed nicely, leaving just a small white scar, but he bemoaned the damage to his suit—the sword slash in the vest, the heavy bloodstains. “No amount of lemon juice will get these out,” he said. “Once fabric turns to granite and back again, well, the discoloration is permanent.”

I didn’t bother pointing out that at least he was alive. I knew he was in shock and dealing with it by concentrating on things he understood and could fix—such as his wardrobe.

We sat together on the bathroom floor. Blitzen used his mending kit to stitch together bath towels for extra Alfheim sun protection, while

Hearthstone and I took turns filling him in on what had been happening.

Blitzen shook his head in amazement. “You did all that for *me*? You crazy, wonderful idiots, you could’ve gotten yourselves killed! And Hearth, you subjected yourself to your father? I *never* would have asked you to do that. You swore you’d never come back here, and for good reason!”

*I also swore to protect you,* Hearth signed. *My fault you were stabbed. And Samirah’s.*

“Stop that right now,” Blitz said. “It wasn’t your fault or hers. You can’t cheat a prophecy. That mortal wound was bound to happen, but now you’ve fixed it, so we can stop worrying about it! Besides, if you want to blame someone, blame that fool Randolph.” He glanced at me. “No offense, kid, but I have a strong desire to murder your uncle with extreme prejudice.”

“No offense taken,” I said. “I’m tempted to help you.”

And yet I remembered Randolph’s horrified cry when he’d stabbed Blitzen, and the way he’d followed Loki like an abused dog. As much as I wanted to hate my uncle, I couldn’t help feeling sorry for him. Now that I’d met Mr. Alderman, I was starting to realize that no matter how bad your family is, it could always be worse.

Hearth finished bringing Blitzen up to speed in sign language, explaining how we’d robbed Andvari and been threatened with multiple Powerball jackpots.

“You were both out of your minds to face that dwarf,” Blitzen said. “He’s infamous in Nidavellir—even craftier and greedier than Eitri Junior!”

“Could we please not mention him?” I pleaded. I still had nightmares about the old dwarf who had challenged Blitz to a crafting contest last January. I never wanted to see another rocket-powered granny-walker as long as I lived.

Blitzen frowned at Hearth. “And you say your father has the ring now?”

Hearthstone nodded. *I tried to warn him.*

“Yes, but still...that thing can warp its owner’s mind beyond recognition. After what happened to Hreidmar, Fafnir, Regin, and all those lottery winners...well, there’s an endless list of people that ring has destroyed.”

“Who are they?” I asked. “Those people you mentioned?”

Blitzen held up his bath-towel creation—a sort of terry cloth burka with sunglasses taped over the eyeholes. “Long, tragic story, kid. Lots of death. The important thing is, we must convince Mr. Alderman to give up that ring before it’s too late. We have to stay at this party of his for a while, right?”

That'll give us a chance. Maybe he'll be in a good mood and we can make him see sense."

Hearthstone grunted. *My father? Doubtful.*

"Yeah," I said. "And if he won't see sense?"

"Then we run," Blitz said. "And we hope Alderman doesn't—"

From the next room, Inge called, "Mr. Hearthstone?"

Her tone verged on panic.

We stumbled out of the bath and found that Hearth's bedroom had been completely stripped. The mattress was gone. The whiteboards had been removed, leaving bright white shadows on only slightly less white walls. The pile of treasure and the blue fur rug had vanished as if the wergild had never happened.

Inge stood in the doorway, her bonnet askew on her head. Her face was flushed, and she was anxiously pulling tufts from the end of her tail. "Master Hearth, the—the guests have arrived. The party has started. Your father is asking for you, but..."

Hearthstone signed, *What's wrong?*

Inge tried to speak. No words came out. She shrugged helplessly, as if she could not describe the horrors she had witnessed at Mr. Alderman's mix-and-mingle. "It's—it's probably best you see for yourself."



## TWENTY-NINE

### Nøkk, Nøkk

ALDERMAN KNEW how to throw a party. He also knew how to throw things at a party.

From the top of the staircase, we gazed down at a living room jammed with well-groomed elves in elegant white, gold, and silver outfits. Their pale eyes, fair hair, and expensive jewelry gleamed in the evening sunlight streaming through the windows. Dozens of hulder servants moved through the crowd, offering drinks and hors d'oeuvres. And in all the cases and niches, where artifacts and minerals were once displayed, piles of Andvari's treasure glittered, making the whole room look like a jewelry warehouse after a tornado.

Above the fireplace mantel, across the foot of Andiron's portrait, hung a golden banner with red letters: WELCOME, MAGNUS CHASE, SON OF FREY, SPONSORED BY HOUSE ALDERMAN! And under that in smaller print: HEARTHSTONE HAS BEEN BROUGHT BACK.

Not "returned." *Been brought back.* As if the elfish marshal service had apprehended him and hauled him home in chains.

Alderman himself circulated through the crowd at double-speed, tossing gold coins to his guests, accosting them with jewelry, and muttering, "Can you believe all this treasure? Amazing, isn't it? Would you like a golden choo choo train? May I interest you in a dagger?"

In his white tuxedo, with his wild eyes and brilliant smile, he looked like a diabolical maître d' seating parties at Chez Mass Murder. His guests

laughed nervously as he threw treasure at them. Once he passed, they muttered to one another, perhaps wondering how soon they could flee the party without seeming impolite. Alderman wove through the room, distributing golden trinkets, and the crowd moved away from him like cats avoiding an out-of-control Roomba.

Behind us, Inge murmured, “Oh, dear. He’s getting worse.”

Hearthstone signed: *The ring is affecting him.*

I nodded, though I wondered how strained Mr. Alderman’s sanity had already been. For decades, he had been living off resentment, blaming Hearthstone for Andiron’s death. Now, suddenly, Hearthstone had freed himself from that debt. Andvari’s ring simply moved in to fill the void with a whole bunch of crazy.

Blitzen gripped the staircase with his gloved hands. “This isn’t good.”

He was wearing his bath-towel burka to protect himself from the Alfheim light. He’d explained to us that his usual pith helmet netting and sunscreen would not be sufficient, as he was still weak from petrification. Still, the outfit was a little disturbing. He looked like a miniature version of Cousin Itt from the Addams Family.

“Aha!” Mr. Alderman spotted us on the stairs and grinned even wider. “Behold, my son and his companions! The dwarf—at least I assume that’s the dwarf under those towels. And Magnus Chase, son of Frey!”

The crowd turned and looked up at us, emitting a fair number of *oohs* and *ahhs*. I’ve never liked being the center of attention. I hated it at school, and later in Valhalla. I hated even more these glamorous elves ogling me like I was a delectable chocolate fountain that had just opened for business.

“Yes, yes!” Mr. Alderman cackled like a maniac. “All this treasure you see, my friends? That is nothing compared to Magnus Chase! My son finally did something right. He brought me a child of Frey as part of his wergild payment. And now this boy Magnus Chase will be my permanent houseguest! We will start a line for photo ops at the bar—”

“Hold up,” I said. “That was *not* the deal, Alderman. We’re not staying past this party.”

Hearthstone signed: *Father, the ring. Dangerous. Take it off.*

The crowd stirred restlessly, not sure what to make of this.

Alderman’s smile eroded. His eyes narrowed. “My son is asking me to take off my new ring.” He held up his hand and wiggled his finger, letting the gold band catch the light. “Now, why would he ask that? And why would

Magnus Chase threaten to leave...unless these scoundrels are planning to steal my treasure?"

Blitzen scoffed. "They just *brought* you that treasure, you daft elf. Why would they steal it again?"

"So you admit it!" Alderman clapped his hands. All the doors to the living room slammed shut. Around the perimeter of the room, a dozen columns of water erupted from the floor and formed vaguely humanoid shapes, like balloon animals filled with water...minus the balloons.

Blitzen yelped. "Those are security *nøkks*."

"What?" I asked.

"Also called *nixies*," he said. "Water spirits. Bad news."

Hearthstone caught Inge's arm. He signed: *You still have family in woods?*

"Y-yes," she said.

*Go now, he said. I release you from my family's service. Don't come back. Also, call police.*

Inge looked stunned and hurt, but then she glanced at the water spirits surrounding the crowd below.

She pecked Hearthstone on the cheek. "I—I love you."

She vanished in a puff of fresh laundry-scented smoke.

Blitzen arched his eyebrow. "Did I miss something?"

Hearthstone shot him an irritated look, but he didn't have time to explain.

Down in the living room, an older elf shouted, "Alderman, what is the meaning of this?"

"The meaning, Lord Mayor?" Alderman grinned with an intensity that was not at all sane. "I now understand why you all came here. You meant to steal my treasure, but I've caught you gold-handed! Security *nøkks*, subdue these thieves! No one leaves here alive!"

Etiquette tip: If you're looking for the right time to leave a party, when the host yells, "No one leaves here alive," that's your cue.

Elves screamed and ran for the exits, but the glass doors were shut fast. Security nixies moved through the crowd, changing shape from animal-like to human-like to solid wave, enveloping the elves one by one and leaving them passed out on the floor in elegant wet lumps. Meanwhile, Alderman

laughed and danced around the room, retrieving his gold trinkets from his fallen guests.

“We’ve got to get out of here *now*,” Blitzen said.

“But we need to help the elves,” I said.

True, with the exception of Hearthstone, I didn’t think much of the elves I’d met. I liked the guppies in Andvari’s pond more. But I also couldn’t stand the idea of leaving four hundred people at the mercy of Mr. Alderman and his liquid nixie thugs. I pulled out my pendant and summoned Jack.

“Hey, guys!” Jack said. “What’s going—ah, nøkks? Are you kidding me? There’s nothing to cut with these guys.”

“Just do what you can!” I yelled.

*Too late*, Hearthstone signed. *Violins!*

I wasn’t sure if I’d read that last sign correctly. Then I looked downstairs. Half the nixies had stationed themselves around the room in humanoid form and were pulling out solid violins and bows from...well, somewhere inside their liquid selves. That seemed like a very bad place to store stringed instruments, but the nixies raised the wooden violins to their watery chins.

“Ears!” Blitz warned.

I clamped my hands to the sides of my head just as the nøkks began to play. It only helped a little. The dirge was so sad and dissonant my knees wobbled. Tears welled in my eyes. All around the room, more elves collapsed in fits of weeping—except Mr. Alderman, who seemed immune. He kept cackling and skipping around, occasionally kicking his VIP guests in the face.

From inside his terrycloth hood, Blitzen let out a muffled yell. “Make it stop or we’ll die of broken hearts in a matter of minutes!”

I didn’t think he was being metaphoric.

Thankfully, Hearthstone was not affected.

He snapped his fingers for attention then pointed at Jack: *Sword. Cut violins.*

“You heard him,” I told Jack.

“No, I didn’t!” Jack complained.

“Kill the violins!”

“Oh. That would be a pleasure.”

Jack flew into action.

Meanwhile, Hearthstone fished out a runestone. He tossed it from the top of the stairs and it exploded in midair, making a giant glowing *H*-shape

above the heads of the elves:

# H

Outside, the sky darkened. Rain hammered against the plate glass windows, drowning out the sound of the violins.

*Follow me, Hearthstone ordered.*

He clambered down the stairs as the storm intensified. Giant hailstones slammed into the windows, cracking the glass, causing the whole house to tremble. I pressed my hand to my waist, making sure the Skofnung Stone was still secure, then I ran after Hearth.

Jack flew from nøkk to nøkk, chopping up their violins and crushing the hopes and dreams of some very talented nixie musicians. The water creatures lashed out at Jack. They didn't seem capable of hurting the sword any more than Jack could hurt them, but Jack kept them occupied long enough for us to reach the bottom of the stairs.

Hearthstone paused and raised his arms. With a tremendous *BOOM!*, every window and glass door in the house shattered. Hail swept in, pummeling the elves, hulder, and nixies alike.

“Let’s go!” I yelled to the crowd. “Come on!”

“Fools!” Alderman cried. “You are mine! You cannot escape!”

We did our best to herd everyone into the yard. Being outside felt like running through a hurricane of baseballs, but it was better than dying surrounded by nøkk fiddlers. I wished I’d had the good sense to cover myself in bath towels like Blitzen.

Elves scattered and fled. The nixies rushed after us, but the hail made them sluggish, slamming into them and forming icy froth until they looked like slushies escaped from their Big Gulp cups.

We were halfway across the lawn, heading for the wilderness, when I heard the sirens. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw emergency lights flashing as police cars and ambulances pulled into the main drive.

Above us, the dark clouds began to break up. The hail subsided. I caught Hearthstone as he stumbled. I almost thought we would make it to the woods when a voice behind us shouted, “Stop!”

Fifty yards away, our old friends Officers Wildflower and Sunspot had drawn their firearms and were preparing to shoot us for loitering, trespassing, or running away without permission.

“Jack!” I yelled.

My sword rocketed toward the cops and sliced off their utility belts. Their pants promptly fell around their ankles. Elves, I discovered, should never wear shorts. They have pale gangly legs that are not at all elegant or graceful.

While they tried to recover their dignity, we plunged into the woods. Hearthstone’s strength was nearly gone. He leaned on me as we ran, but I’d had a lot of practice carrying him. Jack flew to my side.

“That was fun!” he announced. “Afraid I just slowed them down, though. I’m sensing a good place to make a cut just up ahead.”

“Make a cut?” I asked.

“He means between worlds!” Blitzen said. “I don’t know about you, but to me, any of the other eight would be preferable right about now!”

We staggered into the clearing where the old well had been.

Hearthstone shook his head weakly. He signed with one hand, pointing in different directions. *Anywhere but here.*

Blitzen turned to me. “What is this place?”

“It’s where Hearth’s brother...you know.”

Blitzen seemed to shrink under his mound of towels. “Oh.”

“It’s the best spot, guys,” Jack insisted. “There’s a real thin portal between the worlds right on top of that cairn. I can—”

Behind us, a shot rang out. Everyone flinched except Hearthstone. Something buzzed past by my ear like an annoying insect.

“Do it, Jack!” I yelled.

He raced to the cairn. His blade sliced through the air, opening a rift into absolute darkness.

“I love darkness,” Blitzen said. “Come on!”

Together we hauled Hearthstone toward Pees-in-Well’s old lair and jumped into the space between the worlds.



## THIRTY

### Somewhere Over the Rainbow, There's Some Messed-Up Stuff Going On

WE TUMBLED down some steps to a concrete landing. The three of us lay there in a heap, gasping and stunned. We appeared to be in an emergency stairwell—exposed brick walls, industrial green handrail, fire extinguishers, and illuminated EXIT signs. Just above us, the nearest metal door was stenciled with the words FLOOR 6.

I patted frantically at my waist, but the Skofnung Stone was still lashed there securely, undamaged. Jack had returned to pendant form. He rested comfortably on my chain while all the energy he'd expended fighting the nixies drained out of my soul. My bones felt leaden. My vision swam. Who knew slicing up violins and cutting the pants off police officers took so much effort?

Hearthstone wasn't in much better shape. He clawed at the handrail to pull himself up, but his legs didn't seem to be working. I might have thought he was drunk, but I'd never seen him consume anything stronger than Diet Sergeant Pepper in Nidavellir.

Blitzen tugged off his bath-towel burka. "We're in Midgard," he announced. "I'd know that smell anywhere."

To me, the stairwell smelled only like wet elf, dwarf, and Magnus, but I took Blitz's word for it.

Hearth stumbled, a red stain soaking his shirt.  
"Buddy!" Blitz rushed to his side. "What happened?"

“Whoa, Hearth.” I made him sit down and examined the wound.  
“Gunshot. Our friendly elfish police officers gave him a parting gift.”

Blitz pulled off his Frank Sinatra hat and punched right through it. “Can we *please* go twenty-four hours without one of us getting mortally wounded?”

“Relax,” I said. “It just grazed his ribs. Hold him steady.”

I signed to Hearth: *Not bad. I can heal.*

I pressed my hand to the wound. Warmth radiated through Hearthstone’s side. He took a sharp inhale, then began to breathe more easily. The gouge in his skin closed up.

Until I took away my hand, I didn’t realize how worried I’d been. My whole body was shaking. I hadn’t tried my healing powers since Blitzen had been stabbed, and I guess I was afraid they wouldn’t work anymore.

“See?” I tried for a confident smile, though it probably looked like I was having a stroke. “All better.”

*Thanks,* Hearth signed.

“You’re still weaker than I’d like,” I said. “We’ll rest here a minute. Tonight, you’ll need a good meal, lots of fluid, and sleep.”

“Dr. Chase has spoken.” Blitz scowled at the elf. “And no more running into stray bullets, you hear me?”

The corner of Hearth’s mouth twitched. *I can’t hear you. I am deaf.*

“Humor,” I noted. “That’s a good sign.”

We sat together and enjoyed the novelty of not being hunted, wounded, or terrified.

Well, okay, I was still pretty terrified, but one out of three wasn’t bad.

The full suckage of our last thirty-something hours in Alfheim started to sink in. I wanted to believe we’d left that crazy place behind for good—no more trigger-happy cops, manicured estates, or eye-stabbing sunlight. No more Mr. Alderman. But I couldn’t forget what Andvari had told us: Soon I would learn the price of stolen gifts, and Hearthstone was fated to return home again.

*You’ve only delayed a much more dangerous reckoning.*

The othala runestone still sat atop the cairn where Andiron had died. I had a feeling that someday Hearthstone would have to retrieve that missing letter of his cosmic alphabet, whether he wanted to or not.

I stared at Hearth as he flapped his shirt, trying to dry the blood on it. When he finally met my eyes, I signed: *I’m sorry about your dad.*

He half nodded, half shrugged.

“The curse of Fafnir,” I said. “Can I ask...?”

Blitzen cleared his throat. “Maybe we should wait on that until he’s at full strength.”

*It’s okay,* Hearth signed.

He leaned against the wall, steadyng himself so he could use both hands for signing. *Fafnir was a dwarf. Andvari’s ring drove him crazy. He murdered his father, took his gold. Guarded the treasure in a cave.*

*Eventually he turned into a dragon.*

I swallowed. “The ring can do that?”

Blitzen tugged at his beard. “The ring brings out the worst in people, kid. Maybe Mr. Alderman doesn’t have that much evil inside him. Maybe he’ll just...stay an unpleasant elf and win the lottery.”

I remembered Hearth’s father cackling as he kicked his guests, dancing around as his nixies attacked the crowd. Whatever Alderman had inside him, I doubted it was a fuzzy kitten.

I looked at the top of the stairwell, where a sign said ROOF ACCESS.

“We should find Sam,” I said. “We’re supposed to talk to the god Heimdall and get directions to some place in Jotunheim—”

“Ah, kid?” Blitzen’s eye twitched. “I think Hearth might need a little more quiet time before we meet up with Samirah and go racing off to fight giants. I could use some rest, too.”

“Right.” I felt bad bringing up our to-do list. Too many people to meet, too many dangerous worlds to visit. Three days left to find Thor’s hammer. So far we’d found a hot lady sword and a blue rock, barely managed not to get ourselves killed, and driven Hearthstone’s father criminally insane. About par for the course.

“You want to crash at Valhalla for the night?” I asked.

Blitzen grunted. “The thanes don’t like mortals mixing with the honored dead. You go ahead. I’ll take Hearth to Nidavellir and let him rest at my place. His tanning bed is all set up.”

“But...how will you get there?”

Blitz shrugged. “Like I told you before, there’s tons of entrances to Dwarf World underneath Midgard. Probably one in the basement of this building. If not, we’ll just find the nearest sewer.”

*Yes,* Hearth signed. *We love sewers.*

“Don’t you start with the sarcasm,” Blitz said. “Kid, how about we meet tomorrow morning at the old rendezvous point?”

I couldn’t help but smile at the memories of the good old days, hanging out with Hearth and Blitz, wondering where our next meal would come from and when we would next get mugged. The good old days really sucked, but they’d sucked in a less complicated way than the crazy new days.

“The old rendezvous point it is.” I hugged them both. I didn’t want Hearth or Blitz to leave, but neither of them was in any shape to face more danger tonight, and I wasn’t sure what I would find up on the roof. I unfastened the Skofnung Stone from my belt and handed it to Blitz. “Hold on to that. Keep it safe.”

“We will,” Blitz promised. “And, kid...thanks.”

They staggered down the stairwell arm in arm, leaning on each other for support. “Stop stepping on my toes,” Blitz grumbled. “Have you put on weight? No, lead with your left foot, you silly elf. There you go.”

I climbed to the top of the stairwell, wondering where in Midgard I had ended up.

Annoying fact about traveling between worlds: you often pop up exactly where you need to be, whether you *want* to be there or not.

Four people I knew already stood on the rooftop, though I had no idea why. Sam and Amir were having a hushed argument at the base of a huge illuminated billboard. And not just *any* billboard, I realized. Towering above us was the famous Boston Citgo sign, a sixty-foot square of LEDs that washed the rooftop in white, orange, and blue.

Sitting on the edge of the roof, looking very bored, were Halfborn Gunderson and Alex Fierro.

Sam and Amir were too busy arguing to notice me, but Halfborn nodded in greeting. He didn’t seem surprised.

I walked over to my fellow einherjar. “Uh...’sup?”

Alex skipped a piece of gravel across the roof. “Oh, so much fun. Samirah wanted to bring Amir to see the Citgo sign. Something about rainbows. She needed a male relative as a chaperone.”

I blinked. “So you...?”

Alex gave me an exaggerated *at-your-service* bow. “I’m her male relative.”

I had a moment of reality-flipping vertigo as I realized that, yes, indeed, Alex Fierro was presently a *he*. I'm not sure how I knew, other than the fact that he had told me so. His wardrobe wasn't gender specific. He wore his usual rose high-tops with skinny green jeans and a pink long-sleeved T-shirt. His hair, if anything, seemed a little longer, still green with black roots, now combed to one side in the shape of a wave.

"My pronouns are *he* and *him*," Alex confirmed. "And you can stop staring."

"I wasn't..." I caught myself. Arguing would've been pointless.  
"Halfborn, what are you doing here?"

The berserker grinned. He'd put on a Bruins T-shirt and jeans, maybe to blend in with the mortals, though the battle-ax strapped across his back was sort of a giveaway. "Oh, me? I'm chaperoning the chaperone. And my gender hasn't changed, thanks for asking."

Alex smacked him, which would've made Mallory Keen proud.

"Ow!" Halfborn complained. "You hit hard for an argr."

"What have I told you about that term?" Alex said. "I will decide what is manly, unmanly, womanly, or unwomanly for me. Don't make me kill you again."

Halfborn rolled his eyes. "You killed me *one time*. And it wasn't even a fair fight. I got you back at lunch."

"Whatever."

I stared at the two of them. It dawned on me that, over the last day and a half, they had become friends...in the sort of trash-talking, murdering-each-other way hallmates bonded on floor nineteen.

Alex slipped his garrote from his belt loops. "So, Magnus, did you manage to heal your dwarf?"

"Uh, yeah. You heard about that?"

"Sam filled us in." He started to make a cat's cradle with his wire, somehow managing not to cut off his own fingers in the process.

I wondered if it was a good sign that Samirah had shared information with Alex. Maybe they'd started to trust each other. Or maybe Sam's desperation to stop Loki had simply overridden her caution. I wanted to ask Alex about the dream I'd had of Loki in his suite, asking Alex for a *simple request* while Alex threw pots at him. I decided maybe this wasn't the time, especially with Fierro's garrote so close to my neck.

Alex pointed with his chin to Sam and Amir. “You should go on over. They’ve been waiting for you.”

The happy couple was still arguing—Sam making imploring gestures with her upraised palms, Amir tugging at his hair as if he wanted to pull his brain out.

I frowned at Halfborn. “How could they know I would be here? *I didn’t even know.*”

“Odin’s ravens,” Halfborn said, as if that was a perfectly logical explanation. “By all means, go over and interrupt. They’re not getting anywhere with their argument, and I’m bored.”

Halfborn’s definition of boredom was *I am not killing anyone at the moment, nor am I watching someone get killed in an interesting way.* Therefore, I was not anxious to alleviate it. Nevertheless, I approached Sam and Amir.

Happily, Samirah did not impale me with her ax. She even looked relieved to see me. “Magnus, good.” The light of the Citgo sign washed over her, turning her hijab the color of tree bark. “Is Blitzen okay?”

“He’s better.” I told her what had happened, though she seemed distracted. Her eyes kept drifting back to Amir, who was still trying to pull out his brain.

“So,” I wrapped up, “what have you guys been up to?”

Amir barked a laugh. “Oh, you know. The usual.”

The poor guy didn’t sound like he was casting with a full bag of runes. I glanced at his hands to make sure he wasn’t wearing a new cursed ring.

Sam steepled her fingers in front of her mouth. I hoped she didn’t plan on piloting airplanes today, because she looked exhausted. “Magnus...Amir and I have been talking on and off since you left. I brought him here hoping to show him proof.”

“Proof of what?” I asked.

Amir spread his arms. “Gods, apparently! The Nine Worlds! Proof that our whole life is a lie!”

“Amir, our life isn’t a lie.” Sam’s voice quivered. “It’s just...more complicated than you realized.”

He shook his head, his hair now sticking up like an angry rooster’s comb. “Sam, running restaurants is complicated. Pleasing my dad and my grandparents and your grandparents is complicated. Waiting another two

years to marry you when all I want is to be with you—that is complicated. But this? Valkyries? Gods? Einher...I can't even pronounce that word!"

Samirah might have been blushing. It was hard to tell with the lights.

"I want to be with you, too." Her voice was quiet but filled with conviction. "And I'm trying to show you."

Being in the middle of their conversation, I felt about as awkward as an elf in swim trunks. I also felt guilty, because I'd encouraged Sam to be honest with Amir. I'd told her he was strong enough to handle the truth. I didn't want to be proven wrong.

My instinct was to back off and leave them alone, but I got the feeling Sam and Amir were only being this open with each other because they had three chaperones. I will never understand these betrothed teenagers nowadays.

"Sam," I said, "if you're just trying to show him proof of weirdness, bust out your blazing spear. Fly around the roof. You can do a million things—"

"None of which are *meant* to be seen by mortals," she said bitterly. "It's a paradox, Magnus. I'm not *supposed* to reveal my powers to a mortal, so if I try to do it on purpose, my powers won't work. I say, *Hey, look at me fly!* and suddenly I can't fly."

"That doesn't make any sense," I said.

"Thank you," Amir agreed.

Sam stomped her foot. "You try it, Magnus. Show Amir you're an einherji. Jump to the top of the Citgo sign."

I glanced up. Sixty feet...tough, but doable. Yet just thinking about it made my muscles feel wobbly. My strength abandoned me. I suspected that if I tried, I'd hop six inches and make a fool out of myself, which would no doubt be very entertaining to Halfborn and Alex.

"I see your point," I admitted. "But what about Hearthstone and me disappearing from the plane?" I turned to Amir. "You noticed that, right?"

Amir looked lost. "I—I think so. Sam keeps reminding me about it, but it's getting fuzzier. Were you *on* that flight?"

Sam sighed. "His mind is trying to compensate. Amir's more flexible than Barry, who forgot about you guys as soon as we landed. But still..."

I met Sam's eyes, and I realized why she was so worried. By explaining her life to Amir, she was doing more than just being honest. She was literally trying to reconfigure her boyfriend's mind. If she succeeded, she might open up his perception. He would see the Nine Worlds as we did. If she failed...

best case, Amir might eventually forget it all. His mind would gloss over everything that had happened. Worst-case scenario, the experience would leave permanent scars. He might never fully recover. Either way, how could he look at Samirah in the same way again? He would always have a nagging doubt that something was *off*, not quite right.

“Okay,” I said, “so why did you bring him here?”

“Because,” Sam started, like she’d already explained this twenty times tonight, “the easiest supernatural thing for mortals to see is the Bifrost Bridge. We need to find Heimdall anyway, right? I thought if I could teach Amir to see the Bifrost, that might permanently expand his senses.”

“The Bifrost,” I said. “The Rainbow Bridge to Asgard.”

“Yes.”

I looked up at the Citgo sign, New England’s largest illuminated billboard, which had been advertising gasoline over Kenmore Square for about a century. “You’re telling me—”

“It *is* the brightest stationary point in Boston,” Sam said. “The Rainbow Bridge doesn’t *always* anchor here, but most of the time—”

“Guys,” Amir interrupted. “Really, you don’t have to prove anything to me. I’ll just...I’ll take your word for it!” He let out a nervous laugh. “I love you, Sam. I believe you. I may be having a nervous breakdown, but that’s fine! That’s fine. Let’s go do something else!”

I understood why Amir wanted to walk away. I’d seen some crazy stuff —talking swords, knitting zombies, the world’s wealthiest freshwater grouper. But even *I* had trouble believing that the Citgo sign was the gateway to Asgard.

“Listen, man.” I grabbed his shoulders. I figured physical contact was my biggest advantage. Samirah was prohibited from touching him until they were married, but there was nothing quite as convincing as shaking some sense into a friend. “You have to try, okay? I know you’re a Muslim and you don’t believe in a bunch of gods.”

“They’re not gods,” Sam volunteered. “They’re just powerful entities.”

“Whatever,” I said. “Dude, I’m an atheist. I don’t believe in *anything*. And yet...this stuff is real. It’s some messed-up stuff, but it’s real.”

Amir bit his lip. “I—I don’t know, Magnus. This makes me very uncomfortable.”

“I know, man.” I could tell he was trying to listen, but I felt like I was yelling at him while he was wearing noise-canceling headphones. “It makes

me uncomfortable, too. Some of the stuff I've learned..." I stopped. I decided this wasn't the time to bring up my cousin Annabeth and the Greek gods. I didn't want to give Amir an aneurysm.

"Focus on me," I ordered. "Look in my eyes. Can you do that?"

A bead of sweat trickled down the side of his face. With the effort of somebody lifting three hundred pounds, he managed to meet my gaze.

"Okay, now listen," I said. "Repeat after me: We are going to look up together."

"We are g-going to look up together."

"We are going to see a Rainbow Bridge," I said.

"We are going to"—his voice cracked—"see a Rainbow Bridge."

"And our brains will not explode."

"...not explode."

"One, two, three."

We looked.

And crud...there it was.

The perspective of the world seemed to shift, so we were looking at the Citgo sign from a forty-five-degree angle rather than a perpendicular one. From the top of the sign, a burning sheet of colors arced into the night sky.

"Amir," I said, "are you seeing this?"

"I don't believe it," he muttered, in a tone that made it clear he saw.

"Thank Allah," Sam said, smiling brighter than I'd ever seen, "most merciful, most compassionate."

Then from the heavens spoke a voice both squeaky and un-divine: "*HEY, GUYS! COME ON UP!*"



## THIRTY-ONE

### Heimdall Takes a Selfie with Literally Everyone

AMIR ALMOST pulled an einherji move. He would've jumped sixty feet if I hadn't been holding on to him.

"What was that?" he demanded.

Samirah beamed. "You heard him? That's fantastic! It's just Heimdall inviting us up."

"Up, like—*up*?" Amir inched away from the Citgo sign. "How is that fantastic?"

Halfborn and Alex strolled over to join us.

"Will you look at that." Alex didn't sound particularly impressed by the cosmic bridge arcing into the sky. "Is it safe?"

Halfborn tilted his head. "Probably, if Heimdall invited them. Otherwise they'll burn to ash as soon as they set foot on the rainbow."

"*What?*" Amir yelped.

"We're *not* going to burn." Sam glared at Halfborn. "We'll be just fine."

"I'm in," Alex announced. "You two crazy kids still need an escort so you don't do anything irresponsible."

"*Irresponsible?*" Amir's voice went up another half octave. "Like climbing into the sky on a burning rainbow?"

"It's okay, man," I said, though I realized my definition of *okay* had become flexible over the last few months.

Halfborn crossed his arms. "You all have fun. I'm staying right here."

"Why?" Alex asked. "Scared?"

The berserker laughed. "I've met Heimdall before. It's an honor I only need once."

I didn't like the sound of that. "Why? What's he like?"

"You'll see." Halfborn smirked. "I'll meet you back in Valhalla. Have fun exploring inter-dimensional space!"

Sam grinned. "Amir, I can't wait to show you. Come on!"

She stepped toward the Citgo sign and vaporized in a smear of multicolored light.

"Sam?" Amir yelled.

"Oh, cool!" Alex leaped forward and also disappeared.

I clapped Amir's shoulder. "They're fine. Stay strong, man. Now I get to pay you back for all those falafel plates you spotted me when I was homeless. I get to show you the Nine Worlds!"

Amir took a deep breath. To his credit, he didn't collapse, curl into a ball, or cry, all of which would have been perfectly acceptable responses to finding out there were squeaky-voiced beings in the sky who would invite you up their rainbow.

"Magnus?" he said.

"Yeah?"

"Remind me not to give you any more falafel."

Together we stepped into the orange glow.

Nothing to see here. Just four teenagers hiking up a nuclear rainbow.

Radiance surrounded us, fuzzy and hot. Rather than walking across a slick, solid surface, I felt like we were wading through a waist-high field of wheat...if that wheat were made of highly radioactive light.

Somehow, I'd lost my sunglasses from Alfheim. I doubted they would've helped, though. This light was intense in a different way. The colors made my eyes throb like twin hearts. The heat seemed to swirl a millimeter from my skin. Under our feet, the bridge made a low-pitched rumble like the recording of an explosion played on a loop. I supposed Halfborn Gunderson was right: without Heimdall's blessing, we would have been vaporized the moment we set foot on the Bifrost.

Behind us, the cityscape of Boston became an indistinct blur. The sky turned black and full of stars like I used to see on my old hiking trips with my mom. The memory caught in my throat. I thought about the smell of campfires and toasting marshmallows, Mom and I telling each other stories,

making up new constellations like the Twinkie and the Wombat and laughing ourselves silly.

We walked for so long, I began to wonder if there was anything at the other end of the rainbow. Forget pots of gold and leprechauns. Forget Asgard. Maybe this was a practical joke. Heimdall might just cause the Bifrost to disappear and leave us floating in the void. *YOU'RE RIGHT*, his squeaky voice would announce. *WE DON'T EXIST. LOL!*

Gradually the darkness grayed. On the horizon rose the skyline of another city: gleaming walls, golden gates, and behind them, the spires and domes of the gods' palaces. I'd only seen Asgard once before, from the inside, looking out a window in Valhalla. From a distance, it was even more impressive. I imagined charging up this bridge with an invading army of giants. I was pretty sure I'd lose hope when I saw that vast fortress.

And standing on the bridge in front of us, his legs planted wide, was a tall warrior with a huge sword.

I'd imagined a god who was suave and cool—a movie-star type. Real-life Heimdall was kind of a disappointment. He wore a padded cloth tunic and woolly leggings, all beige so he picked up the colors of the Bifrost. It was camouflage, I realized—the perfect way to blend into a rainbow. His hair was white-blond and fuzzy like ram's wool. His grinning face was darkly tanned, which might have been the result of standing on a radioactive bridge for thousands of years. I hoped he didn't plan on having kids someday.

In general, he looked like that goofy guy you didn't want to sit next to on the school bus, except for two things: his unsheathed sword, which was almost as tall as he was, and the huge curled ram's horn slung over his left shoulder. The horn and sword looked imposing, though they were both so large they kept knocking into one another. I got the feeling that if Heimdall killed you, it would only be because he got clumsy and tripped.

As we approached, he waved enthusiastically, making his sword and horn bang into one another: *clink, donk, clink, donk*. "What's up, guys?"

The four of us stopped. Sam bowed. "Lord Heimdall."

Alex looked at her like, *Lord?*

Next to me, Amir pinched the bridge of his nose. "I cannot believe what I'm seeing."

Heimdall arched his fluffy eyebrows. His irises were rings of pure alabaster. "Ooh, what are you seeing?" He gazed past us into the void. "You

mean the guy in Cincinnati with the gun? No, he's okay. He's just going to the firing range. Or do you mean that fire giant in Muspellheim? He *is* coming this way...No, hold on. He tripped! That was hilarious! I wish I'd Vined that."

I tried to follow Heimdall's gaze, but I saw nothing but empty space and stars. "What are you—?"

"My eyesight is really good," explained the god. "I can see into all of the Nine Worlds. And my hearing! I was listening to you guys argue on that rooftop from all the way up here. That's why I decided to throw you a rainbow."

Samirah gulped. "You, ah, heard us arguing?"

Heimdall smiled. "The whole thing. You two are just *too* cute. In fact, could I get a selfie with you before we talk business?"

Amir said, "Uh—"

"Great!" Heimdall fumbled with his horn and his sword.

"Do you need some help?" I asked.

"No, no, I got it."

Alex Fierro sidled up next to me. "Besides, that wouldn't be nearly as funny."

"I can hear you, Alex," the god warned. "I can hear corn growing five hundred miles away. I can hear frost giants belching in their castles in Jotunheim. I can *definitely* hear you. But not to worry, I take selfies all the time. Now let's see..."

He fiddled with his massive ram's horn as if looking for a button. Meanwhile, his sword rested at a precarious angle in the crook of his arm, the six-foot-long blade leaning toward us. I wondered what Jack would think of that sword, whether it was a hot lady or a professional linebacker or maybe both.

"Aha!" Heimdall must have found the right button. His horn shrank into the largest smartphone I'd ever seen, its screen the size of a Sicilian pizza square, its case made of shiny ram's horn.

"Your horn is a phone?" Amir asked.

"I think technically it's a phablet," Heimdall said. "But yes, this is Gjallar, the Horn and/or Phablet of Doomsday! I blow this baby once, the gods know there's trouble in Asgard and they come running. I blow it *twice*, then it's Ragnarok, baby!" He seemed delighted by the idea that he could

signal the start of the final battle that destroyed the Nine Worlds. “Most of the time, I just use it for photos and texting and whatnot.”

“That’s not scary at all,” Alex said.

Heimdall laughed. “You have no idea. Once, I butt-dialed the apocalypse? So embarrassing. I had to text everybody on my contacts list, like, *False alarm!* A lot of gods came running anyway. I made this GIF of them charging up the Bifrost and then realizing there was no battle. Priceless.”

Amir blinked repeatedly, perhaps because Heimdall was a moist talker. “You are in charge of Doomsday. You’re really a—a—”

“An Aesir?” Heimdall said. “Yep, I’m one of Odin’s sons! But between us, Amir, I think Samirah is right.” He leaned in so the people in the cornfields five hundred miles away couldn’t hear him. “Frankly, I don’t think of us as *gods*, either. I mean, once you’ve seen Thor passed out on the floor, or Odin in his bathrobe, yelling at Frigg because she used his toothbrush...it’s hard to see much divinity in my family. Like my moms used to say—”

“Moms, plural?” Amir asked.

“Yeah. I was born of nine mothers.”

“How—?”

“Don’t ask. It’s a pain on Mother’s Day. Nine different phone calls. Nine flower bouquets. When I was a kid, trying to cook nine breakfasts-in-beds... oh, man! Anyway, let’s get this picture.”

He corralled Sam and Amir, who looked stunned to have the grinning face of a god wedged between them. Heimdall held out his phablet, but his arm wasn’t long enough.

I cleared my throat. “You sure you don’t want me to—?”

“No, no! No one can hold the mighty phablet Gjallar except me. But it’s fine! Time-out for a second, guys.” Heimdall stepped back and fumbled with his phone and sword some more, apparently trying to attach them to each other. After a bit of awkward maneuvering (and probably several butt calls to the apocalypse), he held out the sword in triumph, the phablet now hooked on the point. “Ta-da! My best invention yet!”

“You invented the selfie stick,” Alex said. “I was wondering who to blame for that.”

“It’s a selfie sword, actually.” Heimdall wedged his face between Sam and Amir. “Say *gamalost!*” Gjallar flashed.

More fumbling as Heimdall retrieved his phone from the tip of his sword and inspected the picture. “Perfect!”

He proudly showed us the shot, as if we hadn’t been there when it was taken three seconds ago.

“Has anyone ever told you you’re crazy?” Alex asked.

“Crazy fun!” Heimdall said. “Come on, check out some of these other shots.”

He gathered the four of us around his phablet and started flipping through his photo stream, though I was pretty distracted by how much Heimdall smelled like wet sheep.

He showed us a majestic picture of the Taj Mahal with Heimdall’s face looming large in the foreground. Then Valhalla’s dining hall, fuzzy and indistinct, with Heimdall’s total eclipse of a nose in perfect focus. Then the president of the United States giving a State of the Union address with Heimdall photo-bombing.

Pictures of all the Nine Worlds, all selfies.

“Wow,” I said. “Those are...consistent.”

“I don’t like my shirt in this picture.” He showed us a shot of elfish police beating a hulder with nightsticks, Heimdall grinning in front, wearing a blue striped polo. “But, oh, somewhere in here I’ve got this amazing photo of Asgard, with me making this angry face and pretending to eat Odin’s palace!”

“Heimdall,” Samirah interrupted, “those are really interesting, but we were hoping for your help.”

“Hmm? Oh, you want a picture with all five of us? Maybe with Asgard in the background? Sure!”

“Actually,” Sam said, “we’re looking for Thor’s hammer.”

All the excitement went out of Heimdall’s alabaster eyes. “Oh, not that again. I *told* Thor I couldn’t see anything. Every day he calls me, texts me, sends me unsolicited pictures of his goats. ‘Look harder! Look harder!’ I’m telling you, it’s *nowhere*. See for yourself.”

He flipped through more shots. “No hammer. No hammer. There’s me with Beyoncé, but no hammer. Hmm, I should probably make that my profile picture.”

“You know what?” Alex stretched. “I’m just going to lie down over here and not kill anybody annoying, okay?” He lay on his back on the Bifrost,

stuck out his arms, and leisurely waved them through the light, making rainbow angels.

“Uh, yeah,” I said. “Heimdall, I know it’s a drag, but do you think you could take another look for us? We think Mjolnir is hidden underground, so —”

“Well, that would explain it! I can only see through solid rock for, like, a *mile* at most. If it’s deeper than that—”

“Right,” Sam jumped in. “The thing is, we kind of know who took it. A giant named Thrym.”

“Thrym!” Heimdall looked offended, as if that was someone he would *never* deign to take a selfie with. “That horrid, ugly—”

“He wants to marry Sam,” Amir said.

“But he won’t,” Sam said.

Heimdall leaned on his sword. “Well, now. That’s a dilemma. I can tell you where Thrym is easy enough. But he wouldn’t be stupid enough to keep the hammer in his fortress.”

“We know.” I figured we were close to the end of Heimdall’s attention span, but I told him about Loki’s nefarious wedding plans, the Skofnung Sword and Stone, the deadline of three more days, and Goat-Killer, who might or might not be on our side, telling us to find Heimdall and ask for directions. Every so often I randomly tossed in the word *selfie* to keep the god’s interest.

“Hmm,” said Heimdall. “In that case, I’d be happy to scan the Nine Worlds again and find this Goat-Killer person. Let me set up my selfie sword again.”

“Perhaps,” Amir suggested, “if you simply looked without using your phone?”

Heimdall stared at our mortal friend. Amir had said what we’d all been thinking, which was a pretty brave thing to do his first time in Norse outer space, but I was afraid Heimdall might decide to use his sword for something other than wide-angle shots.

Fortunately, Heimdall just patted Amir’s shoulder. “It’s all right, Amir. I know you’re confused about the Nine Worlds and whatnot. But I’m afraid you’re saying words that don’t make any sense.”

“Please, Heimdall,” Sam said. “I know it seems...strange, but gazing *directly* at the Nine Worlds might give you a fresh perspective.”

The god looked unconvinced. “Surely there’s another way to find your goat-killer. Maybe I could blow Gjallar and get the gods up here. We could ask them if they’ve seen—”

“No!” we all screamed at once. Alex came in a little late, as he was still lying down making light angels. He may have added a few colorful modifiers to his *no*.

“Hmph.” Heimdall scowled. “Well, this is highly unorthodox. But I don’t want to see a big ugly giant come between a cute couple like you two.” Heimdall wagged his finger between me and Sam.

“Uh, actually it’s *those* two,” I corrected, pointing to Amir.

Over in the rainbow, Alex snorted.

“Right, of course,” Heimdall said. “Sorry. You guys look very different when you’re not in the camera app. Perhaps you have a point about a fresh perspective! Let’s see what we can find in the Nine Worlds!”



## THIRTY-TWO

### Godzilla Sends Me an Important Message

HEIMDALL GAZED into the distance and immediately stumbled backward. “Nine Mothers of Me!”

Alex Fierro sat up, suddenly interested. “What is it?”

“Uh...” Heimdall’s cheeks were turning the same sheep-like color as his hair. “Giants. A *lot* of them. They—they appear to be massing on the borders of Midgard.”

I wondered what other threats Heimdall had missed while he was photo-bombing the president. Between this guy and hammerless Thor, it was no wonder the safety of Asgard depended on unprepared, undertrained people like...well, us.

Sam managed to keep her voice level. “We know about the giants, Lord Heimdall. They suspect Thor’s hammer is missing. Unless we get it back soon—”

“Yes.” Heimdall licked his lips. “I—I suppose you did say something like that.” He cupped his ear and listened. “They’re talking about...a wedding. Thrym’s wedding. One of the giant generals...he’s grumbling because they have to wait until it is over before they can invade. Apparently Thrym has promised them some good news after the ceremony, something that will make their invasion much easier.”

“An alliance with Loki?” I guessed, though something about that didn’t seem quite right. There had to be more.

“Also,” Heimdall continued, “Thrym has said...yes, his own forces won’t join the invasion until after the wedding. He’s warned the other armies it would be rude to start the war without him. I—I don’t think the giants are scared of Thrym, but from what I’m overhearing, they’re terrified of his sister.”

I remembered my dream: the harsh voice of the giantess who had swatted my pickle jar off the bar. “Heimdall,” I asked, “can you see Thrym? What’s he up to?”

The god squinted and looked deeper into the void. “Yes, there he is, just at the edge of my vision, under a mile or so of rock. Sitting in that horrid fortress of his. Why he wants to live in a cave decorated like a bar, I have no idea. Oh, he is so ugly! I pity the person who marries him.”

“Great,” Sam muttered. “What’s he doing?”

“Drinking,” Heimdall said. “Now he’s belching. Now he’s drinking again. His sister, Thrynga—oh, her voice is like oars scraping on ice! She’s berating him for being a fool. Something about his wedding being a stupid idea and they should just kill the bride as soon as she arrives!”

Heimdall paused, maybe remembering that Samirah was the poor girl in question. “Uh...sorry. As I thought, though, there’s no hammer anywhere. That’s not surprising. These earth giants, they can bury things—”

“Let me guess,” I said. “In the earth?”

“Exactly!” Heimdall looked impressed with my knowledge of earth giants. “They can retrieve those items simply by calling them back to hand. I imagine Thrym will wait until the wedding is finished. Once he has his bride and his bride-price, he’ll summon the hammer...if he feels like keeping his part of the bargain, that is.”

Amir looked more nauseated than I’d felt aboard the Cessna Citation. “Sam, you can’t do this! It’s too dangerous.”

“I won’t.” She balled her fists. “Lord Heimdall, you’re the guardian of the sacred marriage bed, aren’t you? The old stories say you traveled among humankind advising couples, blessing their offspring, and creating the various classes of Viking society?”

“I did?” Heimdall glanced at his phone as if tempted to look up this information. “Um, I mean, yes. Of course!”

“Then hear my sacred vow,” Sam said. “I swear upon the Bifrost and all the Nine Worlds that I will never marry *anyone* except this man, Amir Fadlan.” (Thankfully, she pointed in the correct direction and did not

implicate me. Otherwise things might have been awkward.) “I will not even pretend to marry this giant, Thrym. It will not happen.”

Alex Fierro rose, his mouth set in a frown. “Uh...Sam?”

I figured Alex was thinking the same thing I was: that if Loki could control Sam’s actions, she might not be able to keep this vow.

Sam gave Alex a warning look. Surprisingly, Alex shut up.

“I have made my vow,” Sam announced. “Inshallah, I will keep it and marry Amir Fadlan in accordance with the teachings of the Quran and the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him.”

I wondered if the Bifrost Bridge would collapse under the heavy-duty Muslim sacred vow Sam was laying down, but nothing seemed different except for Amir, who looked like he’d been hit between the eyes with a phablet.

“P-peace be upon him,” he stammered.

Heimdall sniffled. “That was so sweet.” A tear as white as plant sap slid down his cheek. “I hope you crazy kids make a go of it. I really do. I wish...” He tilted head, listening to the distant murmurings of the universe. “Nope, I’m not on the guest list for your wedding with Thrym, darn it.”

Sam looked at me like, *Did I just imagine the last few minutes?* “Lord Heimdall, you mean...the wedding I just swore not to go through with?”

“Yes,” he confirmed. “I’m sure it will be lovely, but that soon-to-be sister-in-law of yours, Thrynga, is going on and on—‘No Aesir, no Vanir.’ They apparently have some first-rate security in place for screening the guests.”

“They don’t want Thor getting in,” Alex guessed, “and stealing back his hammer.”

“That would make sense.” Heimdall kept his eyes on the horizon. “The thing is, this underground fortress-bar of theirs...I’ve seen how it works. There’s only one way in, and the entrance tunnel keeps shifting around, opening in a different place every day. Sometimes it turns up behind a waterfall, or in a Midgard cave, or under the roots of a tree. Even if Thor wanted to plan an assault, he’d have no idea where to start on any given day. I don’t see *how* you could arrange an ambush to steal the hammer.” He frowned. “Thrym and Thrynga are still talking about the guest list. Only family and giants are invited, and...Who is Randolph?”

I felt as if somebody had turned up the thermostat on the Bifrost. My face itched like a hand-shaped burn mark was forming across my cheek.

“Randolph is my uncle,” I said. “Can you see him?”

Heimdall shook his head. “Not in Jotunheim, but Thrym and Thrynga are very annoyed about him being on the list. Thrym is saying, ‘Loki insists.’ Thrynga is throwing bottles.” Heimdall winced. “Sorry, I had to look away. Without the camera, everything seems so three-D!”

Amir watched me with concern. “Magnus, you have an uncle who’s involved in all this?”

I didn’t want to get into it. The scene from the zombies’ barrow kept replaying in my mind: Randolph crying as he drove the Skofnung Sword into Blitzen’s gut.

Thankfully, Alex Fierro changed the subject.

“Hey, Lord Selfie,” he said, “what about the goat-killer? That’s who we need to find right now.”

“Ah, yes.” Heimdall raised his sword blade over his eyes like a visor, nearly decapitating me in the process. “You said a figure in black clothes, with a metal helmet, and a faceplate like a snarling wolf?”

“That’s him,” I said.

“I don’t see him. But there is something strange. I know I said no camera, but...ah, I’m not sure how to describe this.” He raised his phablet and snapped a picture. “What do you make of this?”

The four of us gathered around the screen.

It was hard to judge the scale, since the shot had been taken from inter-dimensional space, but at the top of a cliff sat a massive warehouse-looking building. Across the roof stretched glittery neon letters almost as eye-catching as the Citgo sign: UTGARD LANES.

Behind that, even larger and more awe-inspiring, was an inflatable Godzilla, like you might see advertising a sale at a car dealership. In Godzilla’s hands was a cardboard sign that read:

’SUP, MAGNUS.

COME VISIT!

GOT INFO 4 U. BRING UR FRIENDS!

ONLY WAY 2 BEAT THRYM + GOOD BOWLING.

XOX BIG BOY

I let out a few Norse cuss words. I was tempted to throw the Phablet of Doomsday off the Bifrost Bridge.

“Big Boy,” I said. “I should have known.”

“This is bad,” Sam muttered. “He *told* you that someday you would need his help. But if *he*’s our only hope, we’re doomed.”

“Why?” Amir asked.

“Yeah,” Alex demanded. “Who is this Big Boy who communicates through inflatable Godzillas?”

“I know this one!” Heimdall said cheerfully. “He’s the most dangerous, powerful giant sorcerer of all time! His real name is Utgard-Loki.”



## THIRTY-THREE

### Falafel Break? Yes, Thank You

ANOTHER VIKING pro tip: If Heimdall offers to drop you somewhere, say NO!

Heimdall's idea of sending us back to Midgard was making the Bifrost dissolve around our feet and literally dropping us through infinity. Once we stopped screaming (or it may have been just me again; don't judge), we found ourselves at the corner of Charles and Boylston, standing in front of the Edgar Allan Poe statue. By that point, I definitely had a tell-tale heart. My pulse was going so fast you could've heard that sucker through a brick wall.

We were all exhausted, but we were also hungry and buzzing with post-rainbow adrenaline. Most importantly, we were a block from the Transportation Building food court, where the Fadlans had a restaurant.

"You know..." Amir flexed his fingers as if making sure they were still there. "I could make us some dinner."

"You don't have to, man," I said, which I thought was pretty noble considering how much I loved his family's falafel recipe. (I know he asked me to remind him not to give me any more falafel, but I had decided to interpret that request as temporary insanity.)

Amir shook his head. "No, I—I want to."

I understood what he meant. The guy's world had just been cracked open. He needed to do something familiar to steady his nerves. He craved the comfort of deep-frying chickpea patties, and really, who was I to argue?

The Transportation Building was closed for the night, but Amir had the keys. He let us in, opened Fadlan's Falafel, and prepped the kitchen to make us a late dinner/really early breakfast of amazingness.

Meanwhile, Alex, Sam, and I sat at a table in the darkened food court, listening to the clanging of pots and fryer cages echo through the vast space like metallic bird cries.

Sam looked dazed. She tipped over a saltshaker and wrote letters in the white grains—whether Norse or Arabic, I couldn't tell.

Alex kicked up his rose high-tops on the opposite chair. He twiddled his thumbs, his two-toned eyes scanning the room. "So, this sorcerer giant..."

"Utgard-Loki," I said.

A lot of folks in the Norse cosmos had warned me that names had power. You weren't supposed to utter them unless you had to. Me, I preferred to wear names out like hand-me-down clothes. That seemed the best way to drain the power from them.

"He's not my favorite giant." I glanced around the floor, making sure there were no talking pigeons nearby. "A few months ago, he showed up right here. Tricked me into giving him my falafel. Then he turned into an eagle and dragged me across the rooftops of Boston."

Alex drummed his fingers on the table. "And now he wants you to come visit his bowling alley."

"You know the really messed-up part? That's the *least* crazy thing that has happened to me this week."

Alex snorted. "So why is he called Loki?" He looked at Sam. "Any relation to us?"

Sam shook her head. "His name means Loki of the Outlands. No connection to...our dad."

Not since the Great Alderman Disaster of that afternoon had the word *dad* invoked such negative feelings in a conversation. Looking at Alex and Sam sitting across from each other, I couldn't imagine two people more different. Yet they both wore exactly the same expression: sour resignation that they shared the god of trickery as their pop.

"On the bright side," I said, "Utgard-Loki didn't strike me as a big fan of the other Loki. I can't see the two of them working together."

"They're both giants," Alex pointed out.

"Giants fight among each other just like humans," Sam said. "And, judging by what we learned from Heimdall, getting the hammer back from

Thrym will not be easy. We need all the advice we can get. Utgard-Loki is crafty. He might be the right person to figure out a way to foil Dad's plans."

"Fight Loki with Loki," I said.

Alex ran his hand through his shock of green hair. "I don't care how tricky and clever your giant friend is. In the end, we're going to have to go to that wedding and get the hammer. Which means we'll have to face Loki ourselves."

"We?" I asked.

"I'm going with you," Alex said. "Obviously."

I remembered my dream of Loki in Alex's apartment: *It's such a simple request.* Having two children of Loki at the wedding, both of whom could be controlled by Loki's slightest whim...that was not my definition of a joyous occasion.

Samirah drew another design in the salt. "Alex, I can't ask you to go."

"You're not asking," Alex said, "I'm telling. You brought me into the afterlife. This is my chance to make it count. You know what we need to do."

Sam shook her head. "I—I still don't think that's a good idea."

Alex threw his hands in the air. "Are you even related to me? Where's your sense of recklessness? Of course it's not a good idea, but it's the only way."

"What idea?" I asked. "What way?"

Clearly I had missed a conversation between the two of them, but neither looked anxious to fill me in. Just then, Amir came back with the food. He set down a heaping platter of lamb kebab, dolma, falafel, kibbeh, and other heavenly yummies, and I remembered my priorities.

"You, sir," I said, "are a powerful entity."

He almost smiled. He started to sit next to Sam, but Alex snapped his fingers. "Uh-uh, lover boy. Chaperone says no."

Amir looked mortified. He moved to sit between Alex and me.

We dug in. (Actually, I may have done most of the digging in.)

Amir bit off the corner of a pita-bread triangle. "It doesn't seem possible...food tastes the same. The fryer fries at the same temperature. My keys work in the same locks. And yet...the whole universe has changed."

"Not everything has changed," Sam promised.

Amir's expression was wistful, as if remembering a good experience from childhood that couldn't be recaptured.

“I appreciate it, Sam,” he said. “And I *do* see what you mean about the Norse deities. They aren’t gods. Anyone who can take so many selfies with a sword and a ram’s horn...” He shook his head. “Allah may have ninety-nine names, but Heimdall isn’t one of them.”

Alex grinned. “I like this guy.”

Amir blinked, apparently unsure what to do with the compliment. “So... what now? How do you top a trip across the Bifrost?”

Sam gave him a faint smile. “Well, tonight, I have to have a conversation with Jid and Bibi to explain why I’ve been out so late.”

Amir nodded. “Will you...try to show them the Nine Worlds, as you did for me?”

“She can’t,” Alex said. “They’re too old. Their brains aren’t as flexible.”

“Hey,” I said. “No need to be rude.”

“Just being honest.” Alex chewed on a piece of lamb. “The older you are, the harder it is to accept that the world might not be the way you thought it was. It’s a miracle that Amir managed to see through all the mist and the glamour without going insane.” He kept his eyes on me a moment longer than seemed necessary.

“Yes,” Amir muttered. “I feel very fortunate not to be insane.”

“Alex is right, though,” Sam said. “When I talked to my grandparents this morning, the conversation they’d had with Loki was already fading from their memory. They knew they were supposed to be angry at me. They remembered that you and I had been arguing. But the details...” She made a *poof* gesture with her fingertips.

Amir rubbed his chin. “My dad was the same. He only asked if you and I had patched up our differences. I suspect...we could tell them anything about where we were tonight, couldn’t we? Any mundane excuse, and they would believe it more readily than the truth.”

Alex elbowed him. “Don’t get any ideas, lover boy. I’m still your chaperone.”

“No! I only meant...I would never—”

“Relax,” Alex said. “I’m messing with you.”

“Ah.” Amir did not seem to relax. “And after tonight? What then?”

“We go to Jotunheim,” Sam said. “We have a giant to interrogate.”

“You’re traveling to another world.” Amir shook his head in amazement. “You know, when I arranged those flying lessons with Barry, I...I thought I was expanding your horizons.” He laughed mirthlessly. “Foolish of me.”

“Amir, that was the kindest gift—”

“It’s all right. I’m not complaining. I just...” He let out a sharp exhale.

“What can I do to help you?”

Sam put her hand flat on the table, her fingers stretched toward Amir like an air version of holding hands. “Just trust me. Believe what I promised.”

“I do,” he said. “But there must be something else. Now that I can see everything...” He waved a plastic fork at the ceiling. “I want to support you.”

“You are,” Sam assured him. “You’ve seen me as a Valkyrie, and you haven’t run away screaming. You don’t *know* how much that helps. Just stay safe for me, please, until we get back. Be my anchor.”

“Happily. Although...” He gave her a grin so sheepish it smelled like Heimdall. “I haven’t actually *seen* you as a Valkyrie. Do you think...?”

Sam got to her feet. “Alex, Magnus, I’ll meet you in the morning?”

“The statue in the park,” I said. “See you there.”

She nodded. “Amir, two days hence, this will all be over. I promise.” She rose into the air and disappeared in a golden flash.

The plastic fork fell out of Amir’s hand. “It’s true,” he said. “I can’t believe it.”

Alex grinned. “Well, it’s getting late. There is one more thing you could do for us, Amir, buddy.”

“Of course. Anything.”

“How about a doggie bag for this falafel?”



## THIRTY-FOUR

### We Visit My Favorite Mausoleum

THE NEXT MORNING, I woke in my own bed in Valhalla, unrefreshed and definitely not ready to go. I packed a duffel with camping supplies and leftover falafel. I checked in across the hall with T.J.—who handed me the Skofnung Sword and promised to remain on standby in case I needed cavalry reinforcements or help charging enemy fortifications. Then I met up with Alex Fierro in the lobby and we headed out to Midgard.

Alex agreed to make one stop with me before we rendezvoused with the others. I didn't really *want* to, but I felt obliged to break into Randolph's Back Bay mansion and check in on my murderous, traitorous uncle. Because, you know, that's what family is for.

I wasn't sure what I would do if I found him. Maybe I'd figure out a way to free him from Loki's clutches. Maybe I'd smack him in the face with a bag of kibbeh, though that would be a waste of good kibbeh.

Fortunately for Randolph and my leftovers, he wasn't home. I jimmied the back door as usual—Randolph had not gotten the message about upgrading his locks—then Alex and I wandered through the mansion, stealing Randolph's various stashes of chocolate (because that was a necessity), making fun of his fussy draperies and knickknacks, and finally ending up in the old man's office.

Nothing there had changed since my last visit. Maps lay on the desk. The big Viking tombstone thing stood in the corner, its figure of a wolf still snarling at me. Medieval weapons and trinkets lined the shelves along with

leather-bound books and photographs of Randolph at dig sites in Scandinavia.

On the chain around my neck, Jack's pendant buzzed with tension. I had never brought him to Randolph's house before. I guess he didn't like the place. Or maybe he was just excited because the Skofnung Sword was strapped across my back.

I turned to Alex. "Hey, are you female today?"

The question slipped out before I had a chance to think about whether it was weird, whether it was rude, or whether it would get me decapitated.

Alex smiled with what I hoped was amusement and not homicidal glee. "Why do you ask?"

"The Skofnung Sword. It can't be drawn in the presence of women. I kind of like it better when it can't be drawn."

"Ah. Hold on." Alex's face scrunched up in intense concentration. "There! Now I'm female."

My expression must have been priceless.

Alex burst out laughing. "I'm kidding. Yes, I'm female today. *She* and *her*."

"But you didn't just—"

"Change gender by force of will? No, Magnus. It doesn't work that way." She ran her fingers across Randolph's desk. The stained glass transom window cast multicolored light across her face.

"So can I ask...?" I waved my hands vaguely. I didn't have the words.

"How it *does* work?" She smirked. "As long as you don't ask me to represent every gender-fluid person for you, okay? I'm not an ambassador. I'm not a teacher or a poster child. I'm just"—she mimicked my hand-waving—"me. Trying to be me as best I can."

That sounded fair. At least it was better than her punching me, garroting me, or turning into a cheetah and mauling me. "But you're a shape-shifter," I said. "Can't you just...you know, be whatever you want?"

Her darker eye twitched, as if I'd poked a sore spot.

"That's the irony." She picked up a letter opener and turned it in the stained-glass light. "I can *look* like whatever or whoever I want. But my actual gender? No. I can't change it at will. It's truly fluid, in the sense that I don't control it. Most of the time, I identify as female, but sometimes I have very *male* days. And please don't ask me how I know which I am on which day."

That had, in fact, been my next question. “So why not call yourself, like, *they* and *them*? Wouldn’t that be less confusing than switching back and forth with the pronouns?”

“Less confusing for who? You?”

My mouth must’ve been hanging open, because she rolled her eyes at me like, *You dork*. I hoped Heimdall wasn’t recording the conversation to put on Vine.

“Look, some people prefer *they*,” Alex said. “They’re nonbinary or mid-spectrum or whatever. If they want you to use *they*, then that’s what you should do. But for me, personally, I don’t want to use the same pronouns all the time, because that’s not me. I change a lot. That’s sort of the point. When I’m she, I’m *she*. When I’m he, I’m *he*. I’m not *they*. Get it?”

“If I say *no*, will you hurt me?”

“No.”

“Then no, not really.”

She shrugged. “You don’t have to get it. Just, you know, a little respect.”

“For the girl with the very sharp wire? No problem.”

She must have liked that answer. There was nothing confusing about the smile she gave me. It warmed the office about five degrees.

I cleared my throat. “Anyway, we’re looking for anything that might tell us what’s going on with my uncle.”

I started checking the bookshelves as if I had a clue about what I was doing. I didn’t find any secret messages or levers that opened hidden rooms. It always looked so easy on *Scooby-Doo*.

Alex rummaged through Randolph’s desk drawers. “So you used to live in this big mausoleum?”

“Thankfully, no. My mom and I had an apartment in Allston...before she died. Then I was on the streets.”

“But your family had money.”

“Randolph did.” I picked up an old photo of him with Caroline, Aubrey, and Emma. It was too painful to look at. I turned it around. “You’re going to ask why I didn’t come to live with him instead of being homeless?”

Alex scoffed. “Gods, no. I would never ask that.”

Her voice had turned bitter, as if rich-jerk relatives were something she knew about.

“You come from...somewhere like this?” I asked.

Alex closed the desk drawer. “My family had a lot of things, just not the things that mattered...like a son and heir, for instance. Or, you know, *feelings.*”

I tried to imagine Alex living in a mansion like this, or mingling at an elegant party like Mr. Alderman’s in Alfheim. “Did your folks know you were a child of Loki?”

“Oh, Loki made sure of that. My mortal parents blamed him for the way I was, for being fluid. They said he corrupted me, put ideas in my head, blah, blah, blah.”

“And your parents didn’t just...conveniently forget Loki, like Sam’s grandparents did?”

“I wish. Loki made sure they remembered. He—he opened their eyes permanently, I guess you could say. Like what you did for Amir, except my dad’s motives weren’t as good.”

“I didn’t do anything for Amir.”

Alex walked over to me and crossed her arms. She was wearing pink-and-green flannel today over regular blue jeans. Her hiking boots were boringly practical, except the laces glittered pink metallic.

Her different-colored eyes seemed to pull my thoughts in two directions at once. “You really believe you didn’t do anything?” she asked. “When you grabbed Amir’s shoulders? When your hands started to glow?”

“I...glowed?” I didn’t have any recollection of calling on the power of Frey. It hadn’t even occurred to me that Amir needed healing.

“You saved him, Magnus,” Alex said. “Even *I* could see that. He would’ve cracked under the strain. You gave him the resilience to stretch his mind without breaking. The only reason he’s in one piece, mentally, is because of you.”

I felt like I was back on the Bifrost Bridge, superheated colors burning through me. I didn’t know what to do with the look of approval Alex was giving me, or the idea that I might have healed Amir’s mind without even knowing it.

She punched me in the chest, just hard enough to hurt. “How about we finish up? I’m starting to suffocate in this place.”

“Yeah. Yeah, sure.”

I was having trouble breathing, too, but it wasn’t because of the house. The way Alex spoke so approvingly of me...that had made something click. I realized who she reminded me of—her restless energy, her petite size and

choppy haircut, her flannel shirt and jeans and boots, her disregard for what other people thought of her, even her laugh—on those rare occasions she laughed. She reminded me weirdly of my mom.

I decided not to dwell on that. Pretty soon I'd be psychoanalyzing myself more than Otis the goat.

I scanned the shelves one last time. My eyes fixed on the only framed photo without Randolph in it: a shot of a frozen waterfall in the wilderness, sheets of ice hanging over the ledges of a gray cliff. It could have been just a pretty nature picture from anywhere, but it looked familiar. The colors in it were more vibrant than in the other photos, as if this shot had been taken more recently. I picked it up. There was no dust on the shelf where the frame had been. But there was something else—a green wedding invitation.

Alex studied the photo. "I know that place."

"Bridal Veil Falls," I said. "New Hampshire. I've gone hiking there."

"Same."

Under different circumstances, we might've traded hiking stories. It was another weird similarity between her and my mom, and maybe the reason why Alex had an open atrium in the middle of her hotel suite just like mine.

But at the moment my mind was racing in a different direction. I remembered what Heimdall had said about the fortress of Thrym, how its entrance was always changing, so it would be impossible to predict where it might be on the day of the wedding. *Sometimes it turns up behind a waterfall*, he'd said.

I scanned the wedding invitation, an exact duplicate of the one Sam had thrown away. The *when* column now said: TWO DAYS HENCE. In other words, the day after tomorrow. The *where* column still said: WE'LL GET BACK TO YOU.

The picture of Bridal Veil Falls might just be a random photo. The name of the location might be a coincidence. Or maybe Uncle Randolph wasn't completely under Loki's control. Maybe he'd left me a clue worthy of *Scooby-Doo*.

"That's Sam's wedding invitation," Alex said. "You think it means something that it was tucked behind this photo?"

"Could be nothing," I said. "Or it could be a point of entry for some wedding crashers."



## THIRTY-FIVE

### We Have a Tiny Problem

RENDEZVOUS SPOT: the George Washington statue in the Public Garden. Hearthstone, Blitzen, and Samirah were already there, along with another old friend who happened to be an eight-legged horse.

“Stanley!” I said.

The stallion whinnied and nuzzled me. He nodded toward the statue of George Washington on his charger as if to say, *Can you believe this dude? He ain’t so great. His horse only has four legs.*

The first time I’d met Stanley, we’d hurtled off a Jotunheim cliff together, heading for a giant’s fortress. I was glad to see the horse again, but I had a bad feeling we were about to take part in the sequel—*Cliff Hurtling II: The Rise of Big Boy*.

I stroked Stanley’s muzzle, wishing I had a carrot for him. All I had was chocolate and kibbeh, and I didn’t think either would be good for an eight-legged horse.

“Did you summon him?” I asked Hearthstone. “How are you still conscious?”

The first time Hearth used *ehwaz*, the transportation runestone, he’d collapsed and giggled about washing machines for half an hour.

Hearth shrugged, though I detected a little pride in his expression. He looked better today, after spending a night in the tanning bed. His black jeans and jacket were freshly cleaned, and he had his familiar candy-striped scarf around his neck.

*Easier now, he signed. I can do two, maybe three runes in a row before I collapse.*

“Wow.”

“What did he say?” Alex asked.

I translated.

“Just two or three?” Alex asked. “I mean, no offense, but that doesn’t sound like a lot.”

“It is,” I said. “Using one rune is like the hardest workout you’ve ever done. Imagine an hour of nonstop sprinting.”

“Yeah, I don’t really work out, so—”

Blitzen cleared his throat. “Ah, Magnus? Who’s your friend?”

“Sorry. This is Alex Fierro. Blitzen, Hearthstone, Alex is our newest einherji.”

Blitzen was wearing his pith helmet, so it was difficult to see his expression through the gauze netting. However, I was pretty sure he wasn’t grinning in delight.

“You’re the other child of Loki,” he said.

“Yep,” Alex said. “I promise I won’t kill you.”

For Alex, that was a pretty big concession, but Hearth and Blitz didn’t seem to know what to make of her.

Samirah gave me a dry smile.

“What?” I demanded.

“Nothing.” She was wearing her school uniform, which I thought was pretty optimistic, like, *I’ll just zip over to Jotunheim and be back in time for third-period Government.* “Where have you two been? You didn’t come from the direction of Valhalla.”

I explained about our excursion to Randolph’s, and the photo and wedding invitation that were now in my backpack.

Sam frowned. “You think this waterfall is the way into Thrym’s fortress?”

“Maybe,” I said. “Or at least it might be two days from now. If we know that in advance, we might be able to use the info.”

*How?* Hearth signed.

“Um, I’m not sure yet.”

Blitzen grunted. “I suppose it’s possible. Earth giants can manipulate solid rock even better than dwarves can. They can definitely shift their front doors around. Also”—he shook his head in disgust—“their fortresses are

almost impossible to break into. Tunneling, explosives, blasts of godly power—none of that will work. Believe me, D.I.C.E. has tried.”

“Dice?” I asked.

He looked at me like I was a moron. “The Dwarven Infantry Corps of Engineers. What *else* would it stand for? Anyway, with earth giants you *have* to use the main entrance. But even if your uncle knew where it would be on the wedding day, why would he share that information? This is the man who stabbed me in the gut.”

I didn’t need the reminder. I saw that scene every time I closed my eyes. I also didn’t have a good answer for him, but Alex intervened. “Shouldn’t we get going?”

Sam nodded. “You’re right. Stanley will only stay summoned for a few minutes. He prefers no more than three passengers, so I figured I would fly and carry Hearthstone. Magnus, how about you, Alex, and Blitz take our horse friend?”

Blitzen shifted uneasily in his navy three-piece suit. Maybe he was thinking how badly he and Alex would clash sitting next to each other on the horse.

*It’s okay,* Hearthstone signed to him. *Be safe.*

“Hmph. All right.” Blitz glanced at me. “But I’ve got dibs on the front. Is that called *shotgun* on a horse?”

Stanley whinnied and stomped. I don’t think he liked *shotgun* and *horse* being used in the same sentence.

I handed Sam the Skofnung Sword. Blitzen gave her the Skofnung Stone. We figured, since they were her supposed bride-price, she should have the right to carry them. She wouldn’t be able to draw the sword because of its enchantments, but at least she could brain people with the stone if the need arose.

Stanley allowed us to climb aboard—Blitzen first, Alex in the middle, and me in the back, or as I liked to think of it: *the seat from which you will fall off and die in case of rapid ascent.*

I was afraid that if I held on to Alex she might cut off my head or turn into a giant lizard and bite me or something, but she grabbed my wrists and put them around her waist. “I’m not fragile. And I’m not contagious.”

“I didn’t say anything—”

“Shut up.”

“Shutting up.”

She smelled of clay, like the pottery studio in her suite. She also had a tiny tattoo I hadn't noticed before on the nape of her neck—the curled double serpents of Loki. When I realized what I was looking at, my stomach took a preemptive drop off a cliff, but I didn't have much time to process the tattoo's significance.

Sam said, "See you in Jotunheim." She grabbed Hearthstone's arm and the two of them vanished in a flash of golden light.

Stanley wasn't quite so understated. He galloped toward Arlington Street, jumped the park fence, and charged straight toward the Taj Hotel. A moment before we would've hit the wall, Stanley went airborne. The hotel's marble facade dissolved into a bank of fog and Stanley did a three-sixty barrel roll right through it, somehow managing not to lose us. His hooves touched the ground again, and we were charging through a forested ravine, mountains looming on either side.

Snow-covered pines towered above us. Gunmetal gray clouds hung low and heavy. My breath turned to steam.

I had time to think, *Hey, we're in Jotunheim*, before Blitzen yelled, "Duck!"

The next millisecond demonstrated how much faster I could think than react. First I thought Blitz had spotted an actual duck. Blitzen likes ducks. Then I realized he was telling me to get down, which is hard to do when you're the last in a line of three people on horseback.

Then I saw the large tree branch hanging directly in our path. I realized Stanley was going to run right under it at full speed. Even if the branch had been properly labeled low clearance, Stanley couldn't read.

**SMACK!**

I found myself flat on my back in the snow. Above me, pine branches swayed in fuzzy Technicolor. My teeth ached.

I managed to sit up. My vision cleared, and I spotted Alex a few feet away, curled up and groaning in a pile of pine needles. Blitzen staggered around looking for his pith helmet. Fortunately, Jotunheim light wasn't strong enough to petrify dwarves or he would've already turned to stone.

As for our intrepid ride, Stanley, he was gone. A trail of hoofprints continued under the tree branch and into the woods as far as I could see. Maybe he'd reached the end of his summoning time and vanished. Or maybe he'd gotten caught up in the joy of running and wouldn't realize he'd left us behind for another twenty miles.

Blitzen snatched his pith helmet out of the snow. “Stupid horse. That was rude!”

I helped Alex to her feet. A nasty-looking cut zigzagged across her forehead like a squiggly red mouth.

“You’re bleeding,” I said. “I can fix that.”

She swatted away my hand. “I’m fine, Dr. House, but thanks for the diagnosis.” She turned unsteadily, scanning the forest. “Where are we?”

“More importantly,” Blitz said, “where are the others?”

Sam and Hearthstone were nowhere to be seen. I only hoped Sam was better at avoiding obstacles than Stanley was.

I scowled at the tree branch we’d run into. I wondered if I could get Jack to chop it down before the next group of poor schmucks rode through here. But there was something strange about its texture. Instead of the usual bark pattern, it consisted of crosshatched gray fiber. It didn’t taper to a point, but instead curved down to the ground, where it snaked across the snow. Not a branch, then...more like a huge cable. The top of the cable wound into the trees and disappeared into the clouds.

“What is this thing?” I asked. “It’s not a tree.”

To our left, a dark, looming shape I’d taken for a mountain shifted and rumbled. I realized with bladder-twisting certainty that it wasn’t a mountain. The largest giant I’d ever seen was sitting next to us.

“No, indeed!” his voice boomed. “That’s my shoestring!”

How could I not notice a giant that big? Well, if you didn’t know what you were looking at, he was simply too large to understand. His hiking boots were foothills. His bent knees were mountain peaks. His dark gray bowling shirt blended in with the sky, and his fluffy white beard looked like a bank of snow clouds. Even sitting down, the giant’s gleaming eyes were so far up they could have been blimps or moons.

“Hello, little ones!” The giant’s voice was deep enough to liquefy soft substances—like my eyeballs, for instance. “You should watch where you are going!”

He tucked in his right foot. The tree branch/shoelace we’d smacked into slithered through the pines, uprooting bushes, snapping branches, and scattering terrified woodland creatures. A twelve-point buck leaped out of nowhere and almost ran over Blitzen.

The giant leaned over, blocking out the gray light. He tied his shoe, humming as he worked, looping one massive cable over the other, the laces flailing and laying waste to whole swaths of forest.

Once the giant had done a proper double knot, the earth stopped shaking.

Alex yelled, “Who are you? And why haven’t you ever heard of Velcro straps?”

I’m not sure where she found the courage to speak. Maybe it was her head injury talking. Me, I was trying to decide if Jack had the power to kill a giant this big. Even if Jack managed to fly up the giant’s nose, I doubted his blade would do much more than cause a sneeze. And we didn’t want that.

The giant straightened and laughed. I wondered if his ears popped when he got that high in the stratosphere. “Hoo-hoo! The green-haired gnat is feisty! My name is Tiny!”

Now that I looked, I could see the name TINY embroidered on his bowling shirt like the distant letters of the Hollywood sign.

“Tiny,” I said.

I didn’t think he could possibly hear me any more than I could hear ants having an argument, but he grinned and nodded. “Yes, puny one. The other giants like to tease me, because, compared to most at Utgard-Loki’s palace, I am small.”

Blitzen dusted twigs from his blue jacket. “It’s got to be an illusion,” he muttered to us. “He can’t really be that big.”

Alex touched her bloody forehead. “*This isn’t an illusion. That shoelace felt plenty real.*”

The giant stretched. “Well, it’s a good thing you woke me from my nap. I suppose I should get going!”

“Hold on,” I yelled. “You said you were from Utgard-Loki’s palace?”

“Hmm? Oh, yes. Utgard Lanes! Would you be heading that way?”

“Uh, yeah!” I said. “We need to see the king!”

I was hoping Tiny might scoop us up and give us a ride. That seemed like the proper thing to do for travelers who’d just had a hit-and-run with your shoestring.

Tiny chuckled. “I don’t know how you’d fare at Utgard Lanes. We’re a little busy getting ready for the bowling tournament tomorrow. If you can’t even navigate around our shoestrings, you might get accidentally crushed.”

“We’ll do fine!” Alex said—again, with a lot more confidence than I could’ve mustered. “Where is the palace?”

“Just over yonder.” Tiny waved to his left, causing a new low-pressure front. “Easy two-minute walk.”

I tried to translate that from Giantese. I figured that meant the palace was about seven billion miles away.

“You couldn’t give us a lift, maybe?” I tried not to sound too pitiful.

“Well, now,” Tiny said, “I don’t really owe you any favors, do I? You’d have to make it over the threshold of the fortress to claim guest privileges. *Then we’ll have to treat you right.*”

“Here we go,” Blitzen grumbled.

I remembered how guest rights worked from our last time in Jotunheim. If you made it inside the house and claimed you were a guest, supposedly the host couldn’t kill you. Of course, when we’d tried that before, we ended up slaughtering an entire giant family after they attempted to squash us like bugs, but it had all been done with the utmost courtesy.

“Besides,” Tiny continued, “if you can’t make it to Utgard Lanes yourself, you really shouldn’t be there! Most giants are not as easygoing as I am. You need to be careful, little ones. My larger kin might take you for trespassers or termites or something! Really, I would stay away.”

I had a terrible vision of Sam and Hearthstone flying into the bowling alley and getting caught in the world’s largest bug zapper.

“We have to get there!” I shouted. “We’re meeting two friends.”

“Hmm.” Tiny raised his forearm, revealing a Mount Rushmore-size tattoo of Elvis Presley. The giant scratched his beard, and a single white whisker twirled down like an Apache helicopter and crashed nearby, sending up a mushroom cloud of snow. “Tell you what, then. You carry my bowling bag. That way everyone will know you’re a friend. Do me this small service, and I’ll vouch for you with Utgard-Loki. Try to keep up! But if you do fall behind, make sure you reach the castle by tomorrow morning. That’s when the tournament begins!”

He got to his feet and turned to leave. I had time to admire his scraggly gray man bun and read the giant yellow words embroidered across the back of his shirt: TINY’S TURKEY BOWLERS. I wondered if that was the name of his team or maybe his business. I pictured turkeys the size of cathedrals, and I knew they would be haunting my nightmares forever.

Then, in two steps, Tiny disappeared over the horizon.

I looked at my friends. “What did we just get ourselves into?”

“Well, good news,” Blitzen said. “I found the bag. Bad news...I found the bag.”

He pointed to a nearby mountain: a sheer dark cliff that rose five hundred feet to a wide plateau at the summit. But of course it wasn’t a mountain. It was a brown leather bowling bag.



## THIRTY-SIX

### Solving Problems with Extreme Fashion

AT THIS POINT, most people would have thrown themselves down on the ground and given up hope. And by most people, I mean me.

I sat in the snow and stared up at the towering cliffs of Mount Bowling Bag. TINY'S TURKEY BOWLERS was etched across the brown leather in black letters so faded they looked like random fault lines.

“There’s no way,” I said.

Alex’s forehead had stopped bleeding, but the skin around the cut had turned as green as her hair, which wasn’t a good sign. “I hate to agree with you, Maggie, but yeah. It’s impossible.”

“Please don’t call me Maggie,” I said. “Even Beantown is better than that.”

Alex looked like she was mentally filing away that information for later use. “What do you want to bet there’s a bowling ball in that bag? Probably weighs as much as an aircraft carrier.”

“Does it matter?” I asked. “Even empty, the bag is too big to move.”

Only Blitzen didn’t look defeated. He paced around the foot of the bag, running his fingers across the leather, muttering to himself as if running calculations.

“It has to be an illusion,” he said. “No bowling bag could be this big. No giant is that big.”

“They *are* called giants,” I noted. “Maybe if we had Hearthstone here he could do some rune magic, but—”

“Kid, work with me,” Blitz said. “I’m trying to problem-solve. This is a fashion accessory. It’s a *bag*. This is my specialty.”

I wanted to argue that bowling bags were about as far from fashion as Boston was from China. I didn’t see how one dwarf, no matter how talented, could solve this mountain of a problem with a few clever style choices. But I didn’t want to seem negative.

“What are you thinking?” I asked.

“Well, we can’t dispel the illusion outright,” Blitz murmured. “We have to work with what we have, not against it. I wonder...”

He put his ear to the leather as if listening. Then he began to grin.

“Uh, Blitz?” I said. “You make me nervous when you smile like that.”

“This bag was never finished. It has no name.”

“A name,” Alex said. “Like *Hi, Bag. My name is Alex. What’s yours?*”

Blitzen nodded. “Exactly. Dwarves always name their creations. No item is fully crafted until it has a name.”

“Yeah, but, Blitz,” I said, “this is a *giant’s* bag. Not a dwarf’s bag.”

“Ah, but it *could* be. Don’t you see? I could finish crafting it.”

Alex and I both stared at him.

He sighed. “Look, while I was hanging out with Hearthstone in the safe house, I got bored. I started thinking up new projects. One of them...well, you know Hearthstone’s personal rune, right? *Perthro*? ”

“The empty cup,” I said. “Yeah, I remember.”

“The what?” Alex asked.

I drew the rune sign in the dirt:



“It means a cup waiting to be filled,” I said. “Or a person who’s been hollowed out, waiting for something to make his life meaningful.”

Alex frowned. “Gods, that is depressing.”

“The point is,” Blitz said, “I’ve been considering a perthro bag—a bag that can never be filled. The bag would always feel empty and light. Most importantly, it would be any size you wanted.”

I looked at Mount Bowling Bag. Its side rose so high that birds wheeled against it in dismay. Or maybe they were just admiring its fine

craftsmanship.

“Blitz,” I said, “I like your optimism. But I have to point out that this bag is roughly the size of Nantucket.”

“Yes, yes. It’s not ideal. I was hoping to make a prototype first. But if I can finish the bowling bag by naming it, stitching a little stylish embroidery into the leather, and giving it a command word, I might be able to channel its magic.” He patted his pockets until he found his sewing kit. “Hmm, I’ll need better tools.”

“Yeah,” Alex said. “That leather is probably five feet thick.”

“Ah,” Blitz said, “but we have the best sewing needle in the world!”

“Jack,” I guessed.

Blitz’s eyes sparkled. I hadn’t seen him this excited since he created the chain mail cummerbund.

“I’ll also require some magic ingredients,” he said. “You guys will have to pitch in. I’ll need to weave thread from special filaments—something with power, resilience, and magical growth properties. For instance, the hair of a son of Frey!”

I felt like he’d smacked me in the face with a shoestring. “Say what now?”

Alex laughed. “I love this plan. His hair needs a good cut. Like, what *is* this, 1993?”

“Hold up now,” I protested.

“Also...” Blitz scrutinized Alex. “The bag needs to change sizes, which means I’ll need to dye the thread with the blood of a shape-shifter.”

Alex’s smile melted. “How much blood are we talking about?”

“Just a little.”

She hesitated, maybe wondering if she should bust out her garrote and substitute the blood of a dwarf and an einherji.

Finally, she sighed and rolled up her flannel sleeve. “All right, dwarf. Let’s make a magic bowling bag.”



## THIRTY-SEVEN

### Meat S'mores Roasting on an Open Fire

NOTHING BEATS camping out in a dreary Jotunheim forest while your friend stitches runes on a giant bowling bag!

“All *day*?” Alex complained when Blitz estimated his time until completion. Granted, she was a little grumpy after being smacked down by a giant shoelace, getting cut with a knife, and having her blood drained into a thermos cap. “We’re on the clock here, dwarf!”

“I know that.” Blitz spoke calmly, like he was addressing a Nidavellir kindergarten class. “I also know that we’re completely exposed here in the middle of giant territory and Sam and Hearth are missing, which is *killing* me. But our best chance of finding them and getting the information we need is by reaching Utgard-Loki’s palace. The best way to do that without *dying* is to enchant this bag. So, unless you know a faster way, yes, it will take me all day. I may have to work through the night as well.”

Alex scowled, but arguing with Blitzen’s logic was as pointless as arguing with his fashion sense. “What are we supposed do, then?”

“Bring me meals and water,” Blitz said. “Keep watch, especially at night, so I don’t get eaten by trolls. Cross your fingers that Sam and Hearth show up in the meantime. And Magnus, let me borrow your sword.”

I summoned Jack, who was happy to help.

“Oh, sewing?” His blade runes glowed with excitement. “This reminds me of the Great Icelandic Sew-Off of 886 c.e.! Frey and I *destroyed* the

competition. A lot of warriors went home weeping, we shamed their stitching and darning skills so bad.”

I decided not to ask. The less I knew about my father’s sewing victories, the better.

While Jack and Blitz talked strategy, Alex and I made camp. She’d brought supplies, too, so in no time we had set up a nice level spot with a couple of pup tents and a stone-ringed fire pit.

“You must have camped a lot,” I noted.

She shrugged, arranging twigs for kindling. “I love the outdoors. Me and some kids at my pottery studio in Brookline Village, we used to go up to the mountains just to get away.”

She packed a lot of emotion in those last two words: *get away*.

“A pottery studio?” I asked.

She scowled as if trying to detect sarcasm. Maybe she’d fielded dumb questions from people, like: *Oh, you make pottery? How cute! I used to like Play-Doh when I was young!*

“The studio was the only consistent place for me,” she said. “They let me crash there when things were bad at home.”

From her pack, she dug out a box of wooden matches. Her fingers seemed to fumble when she took a few sticks from the box. The cut on her forehead had turned a darker shade of green, but she still refused to let me heal it.

“The thing about clay,” she said, “it can turn into any shape. I get to decide what’s best for each piece. I just sort of...listen to what the clay wants. I know that sounds stupid.”

“You’re saying this to a guy with a talking sword.”

She snorted. “I suppose, but...” The matches fell out of her hand. She sat down hard, her face suddenly chalky.

“Whoa.” I scooted over to her. “You’re going to *have* to let me heal that head wound. Gods only know what kind of bacteria was on Tiny’s shoestring, and you donating blood to Blitz’s arts and crafts project didn’t help.”

“No, I don’t want—” She faltered. “There’s a first aid kit in my bag. I’ll just—”

“A first aid kit isn’t going to do it. What were you about to say?”

Alex touched her forehead and winced. “Nothing.”

“You said ‘I don’t want—’”

“This!” she snapped. “You nosing around in my business! Samirah told me that when you heal people—like the elf, Hearthstone—you get inside their heads, you see stuff. I don’t want that!”

I looked away, my hands turning numb. In the fire pit, Alex’s kindling pyramid fell apart. Her matches had scattered in a rune-like pattern, but if it meant anything, I couldn’t read it.

I thought about something Halfborn Gunderson had once told me about wolf packs: each wolf pushes the limits within its pack. They are constantly testing where they stand in the hierarchy—where they can sleep, how much they can eat of a fresh kill. They continue to push until the alpha wolf snaps at them and reminds them of their place. I hadn’t realized I was pushing, but I’d just gotten a first-rate alpha-snapping.

“I...don’t really control what happens when I heal.” I was surprised that my voice still worked. “With Hearth, I had to use a lot of power. He was almost dead. I don’t think I could read much from you while just fixing an infected cut. I’ll try not to, anyway. But if you don’t get some healing...”

She stared at the bandage on the spot where Blitzen had taken blood from her arm.

“Yeah. Yeah, okay. Just...forehead only. Nothing *inside* the head.”

I touched her brow. She was burning up with fever. I summoned the power of Frey, and Alex let out a gasp. Instantly, her wound closed. Her skin cooled. Her color returned to normal.

My hands were hardly glowing at all. Something about being out in the wilderness, surrounded by nature, seemed to make the healing easier.

“I didn’t learn a thing,” I promised Alex. “You are still a mystery wrapped in a question mark wrapped in flannel.”

She exhaled, making a sound between a laugh and a sigh of relief.  
“Thanks, Magnus. Now maybe we can actually get this fire started?”

She didn’t call me Maggie or Beantown. I chose to take that as a peace offering.

Once we had a good blaze going, we tried to figure out the best way to repurpose Fadlan’s Falafel over an open flame. We learned an important lesson: one cannot make s’mores out of lamb meat and chickpea patties. Mostly we ate the chocolate from Uncle Randolph’s house.

Blitz took the better part of the morning spinning his magic thread on his collapsible travel spindle. (Of course he had one of those in his kit bag. Why

wouldn't he?) Meanwhile, Jack flew up and down the side of the bowling bag, perforating the pattern Blitz wanted him to sew.

Alex and I kept watch, but nothing much happened. Sam and Hearthstone didn't appear. No giants eclipsed the sun or destroyed the forest with their untied shoelaces. The most dangerous thing we spotted was a red squirrel in a branch above our campfire. It probably wasn't a threat, but since meeting Ratatosk I took no chances. I kept an eye on it until it leaped to another tree.

In the afternoon, things got more exciting. After we fed Blitz some lunch, he and Jack got to work on the actual stitching. Somehow—uh, perhaps *with magic*?—Blitz had made a whole pile of shimmering red yarn from my hair, Alex Fierro's blood, and threads from his own vest. Blitz tied one end of it to Jack's pommel, and Jack flew back and forth across the side of the bag, diving in and out of the leather like a dolphin, leaving a shimmering trail of stitches. Watching him reminded me of how we'd tied up Fenris Wolf...which was a memory I didn't really care to have.

Blitzen called out directions. "Your left, Jack! Drop that stitch! Okay, give me a backstitch! Bunny-punch me a hole on the end there!"

Alex nibbled her chocolate bar. "Bunny-punch?"

"I have no idea," I admitted.

Maybe inspired by the sewing display, Alex unthreaded her garrote from her belt loops. She ran the metal wire across the soles of her boots, scraping off icy mud.

"Why that weapon?" I asked. "Or you can just tell me to shut up again."

Alex gave me a sideways smile. "You're fine. It started out as my clay-cutter."

"Clay-cutter. Like the wire you run through a slab of clay."

"You figured that out all on your own?"

"Ha, ha. I'm guessing most clay-cutters don't have combat applications?"

"Not so much. My m—" She hesitated. "Loki visited me one day at the studio. He was trying to impress me, show me how much he could do for me. He taught me an enchantment I could use to make a magical weapon. I didn't want to give him the satisfaction of helping me. So I tried his spell on the stupidest, most innocuous thing I could think of. I didn't figure a wire with dowel handles could ever be a weapon."

"And yet..."

Alex pointed to a nearby boulder—a rough chunk of granite about the size of a piano. She lashed out with her garrote, holding one end like a whip. The wire lengthened as it flew. The far end wrapped around the boulder and held fast. Alex yanked it toward her. The top half of the boulder slid off the bottom half with a grinding sound like a lid being removed from a porcelain cookie jar.

The wire flew back to Alex's hand.

"Pretty good." I tried not to let my eyes pop out of their sockets. "But does it make french fries?"

Alex muttered something about stupid boys, which I'm sure had nothing to do with me.

The afternoon light faded quickly. Over at the bowling bag, Blitz and Jack kept working on their entry in the Great Jotunheim Sew-Off. The shadows got longer. The temperature plunged. I noticed this because Blitz had recently given me a drastic haircut and my exposed neck was cold. I was just grateful there were no mirrors around to show me the horrors Blitz had worked upon my head.

Alex threw another tree branch into the fire. "You might as well ask."

I stirred. "Sorry?"

"You want to ask me about Loki," Alex prompted. "Why I put his symbol on my pottery, why I have a tattoo. You want to know if I'm working for him."

Those questions *had* been lurking in the back of my mind, but I didn't understand how Alex could know that. I wondered if my healing touch had backfired somehow. Maybe I'd given Alex a look inside *my* head.

"I guess it worries me," I admitted. "You act as if you don't like Loki—"

"I don't."

"Then why his symbol?"

Alex cupped her hands around the back of her neck. "That design, the two entwined snakes? It's usually called the Urnes snakes, named after some place in Norway. Anyway, it's not necessarily a symbol of Loki." She laced her fingers and wiggled them around. "The snakes signify change and flexibility. Being versatile. People started using the snakes to represent Loki, and Loki was fine with that. But I decided...why does Loki get to take over that cool symbol? I like it. I'm making it mine. He doesn't get to own the symbol for change any more than he owns me. To Helheim with what people think."

I watched the flames break down another piece of wood; a swarm of orange sparks rose from the pit. I remembered my dream of Alex's suite, Loki turning into a woman with red hair. I thought about the hesitation in Alex's voice when she talked about Loki as her parent.

"You're like the eight-legged horse," I realized.

Alex frowned. "Stanley?"

"No, the *original* eight-legged horse. What's his name? Sleipnir. Mallory Keen told me the story, something about Loki turning into a beautiful mare so he could lure a giant's stallion away. And then...Loki got pregnant. He—*she* gave birth to Sleipnir." I glanced at Alex, very aware of the garrote now lying across her thigh. "Loki's not your father, is he? He's your mom."

Alex just stared at me.

I thought, *Well, here comes the wire. Good-bye, limbs! Good-bye, head!*

She surprised me with a sour laugh. "I think that haircut improved your brainpower."

I resisted the urge to pat my hacked locks. "So I'm right?"

"Yes." She tugged at her glittery pink bootlaces. "I wish I could've seen the look on my dad's face when he found out. From what I gather, Loki shape-shifted into the sort of woman my dad liked. My dad was already married, but that never stopped him. He was used to getting what he wanted. He had an affair with this voluptuous redhead. Nine months later, Loki showed up at my dad's doorstep with a little baby as a present."

I tried to imagine Loki in his usual dashing form, maybe wearing a green tuxedo, ringing the doorbell of some upscale house in the suburbs. *Hi, I was that lady you had a fling with. Here's our kid.*

"How did your mortal mom react?" I asked. "I mean, your dad's wife...I mean, your stepmother..."

"It's confusing, huh?" Alex tossed another stick into the fire. "My stepmom wasn't happy about it. I grew up with two parents who resented me and found me embarrassing. Then there was Loki, who kept showing up at random times, trying to *parent* me."

"Man," I said.

"Woman, today," Alex corrected.

"No, I mean..." I stopped, realizing she was teasing me. "What happened? When did you finally leave home?"

"Two years ago, more or less. As for what happened? A lot."

This time I recognized the warning tone in her voice. I was not welcome to ask for more details.

Still...Alex had become homeless around the same time my mom died, the same time I'd ended up on the streets. That coincidence didn't sit well with me.

Before I could chicken out, I blurted, "Did Loki ask you to come with us?"

She locked eyes with me. "What do you mean?"

I told her about my dream: her throwing pots at her father (mother), Loki saying: *It's such a simple request.*

It was fully dark now, though I wasn't sure when that had happened. In the firelight, Alex's face seemed to shift and jump. I tried to tell myself it wasn't the Loki part of her revealing itself. It was just change, flexibility. Those twisting snakes on her neck were completely innocent.

"You've got it wrong," Alex said. "He told me *not* to come."

A strange pulsing sound filled in my ears. I realized it was my own heartbeat. "Why would Loki tell you that? And...what were you and Sam talking about last night—some plan?"

She curled her garrote around her hands. "Maybe you'll find out, Magnus. And by the way, if you ever spy on me in your dreams again—"

"Guys!" Blitzen yelled from Mount Bowling Bag. "Come take a look!"



## THIRTY-EIGHT

# You Will Never, Ever Guess Blitzen's Password

JACK HOVERED proudly next to his handiwork.

Can you have handiwork if you don't have hands?

Stitched into the bag's side were several new lines of glowing red runic script.

"What does it say?" Alex asked.

"Oh, a few technical runes." Blitz's eyes crinkled with satisfaction.

"Magic nuts and bolts, terms and conditions, the end-user agreement. But there at the bottom, it says: 'EMPTYLEATHER, a bag completed by Blitzen, son of Freya. Jack helped.'"

"I wrote that!" Jack said proudly. "I helped!"

"Good job, buddy," I said. "So...does it work?"

"We're about to find out!" Blitzen rubbed his hands eagerly. "I'm going to speak the secret word of command. Then this bag will either shrink to an easy carrying size, or—well, I'm sure it will shrink."

"Rewind to the *or*," Alex said. "What *else* might happen?"

Blitzen shrugged. "Well...there's a slight chance the bag could expand and cover most of this continent. No, no. I'm sure I got it right. Jack was very careful about backstitching the runes where I told him to."

"I was supposed to backstitch?" Jack glowed yellow. "Just kidding. Yeah, I backstitched."

I wasn't feeling so confident. On the other hand, if the bag expanded to continental size, I wouldn't live long enough to care.

“Okay,” I said. “What’s the password?”

“Don’t!” Blitzen shrieked.

The bowling bag shuddered. The entire forest trembled. The bag collapsed so fast I got nauseated from the change in perspective. The mountain of leather was gone. Sitting at Blitzen’s feet was a regular-size bowling bag.

“YES!” Blitz picked it up and peeked inside. “There’s a bowling ball inside, but the bag feels completely empty. Jack, we did it!”

They gave each other a high five—or a high just-one, since Jack’s blade had no fingers.

“Hold on,” Alex said. “I mean...good job and all. But did you seriously make the password *password*? ”

“DON’T!” Blitz threw the bowling bag like a grenade into the woods. Instantly it grew back to the size of a mountain, causing a tidal wave of crushed trees and terrified animals. I almost felt sorry for the untrustworthy squirrels.

“I was in a rush!” Blitzen huffed. “I can reset the p—the *word of command* later on, but that would take more thread and more time. For now, can you *please* avoid saying...you know, *that word*? ”

He proceeded to say *that word*. The bag shrank back to small size.

“You did great, man,” I said. “And hey, Jack, nice stitching.”

“Thanks, *señor*! I love your sawed-off haircut, too. You don’t look like that Nirvana guy anymore. More like, I dunno...Johnny Rotten? Or a blond Joan Jett?”

Alex cracked up. “How do you even know those people? T.J. told me you were you at the bottom of a river for a thousand years.”

“I was, but I’ve been studying up!”

Alex snickered. “Joan Jett.”

“Just shut up, both of you,” I grumbled. “Who’s ready to go bowling?”

No one was ready to go bowling.

Blitzen crawled into a pup tent and collapsed from exhaustion. Then I made the mistake of letting Jack return to pendant form and I collapsed from exhaustion, feeling like I’d spent all day climbing cliffs.

Alex promised to keep watch. At least I think that’s what she said. She could have announced *I’ll invite Loki into camp and kill you all in your sleep! HAHAHAHA!* and I still would’ve passed out.

I dreamed of nothing except dolphins happily leaping through a sea of leather.

I woke as the sky was turning from black to charcoal. I insisted Alex get a few hours of shut-eye. By the time all three of us had gotten up, eaten, and broken camp, the sky was a thick blanket of dirty gray.

Almost twenty-four hours lost. Samirah and Hearthstone were still missing. I tried to imagine them safe by the fire in Utgard-Loki's home, sharing stories and eating well. Instead, I imagined a bunch of giants by the fire, sharing stories about the tasty mortals they'd eaten the night before.

*Stop that*, I told my brain.

*Also, the wedding is tomorrow*, said my brain.

*Get out of my head*.

My brain refused to get out of my head. Inconsiderate brain.

We hiked through the ravine, trying to keep to the direction Tiny had indicated. You'd think we could've just followed his footprints, but it was difficult to tell them apart from the natural valleys and canyons.

After about an hour, we spotted our destination. On a massive cliff in the distance rose a boxy warehouse-type structure. The inflatable Godzilla was gone (the daily rental for something like that must have been exorbitant), but the neon sign still blazed: UTGARD LANES. The letters flashed one at a time, then all together, then with sparkles around the edges—just so you didn't miss the only neon sign on the biggest cliff in Jotunheim.

We trudged up a winding trail that was perfect for colossal donkeys, but not so much for small mortals. The cold wind pushed us around. My feet ached. Thank goodness for Blitzen's magic bowling bag, because dragging the full-size version up that cliff would have been impossible and also not fun.

Once we reached the top, I realized just how big Utgard Lanes really was. The building itself could have housed most of downtown Boston. The maroon upholstered double doors were studded with brass tacks each as big as your average three-bedroom house. In the grimy windows glowed neon ads for Jotun Juice, Big Small Ale, and Mega Mead. Tethered to posts outside were colossal riding animals: horses, rams, yaks, and, yes, donkeys —each roughly the size of Kilimanjaro.

"No need to fear," Blitz muttered to himself. "It's just like a dwarven bar. Only...bigger."

"So how do we do this?" Alex asked. "Direct frontal assault?"

"Ha, ha," I said. "Sam and Hearth might be in there, so we play by the rules. Walk in. Ask for guest rights. Try to negotiate."

"And when that doesn't work," Blitz said, "we improvise."

Alex, being all about change and versatility, said, "I hate this idea." Then she frowned at me. "Also, you owe me a drink for dreaming about me."

She marched toward the entrance.

Blitzen raised his eyebrows. "Do I want to ask?"

"No," I said. "You really don't."

Getting past the front doors was no problem. We walked right under them without even having to crouch.

Inside was the largest, most crowded bowling alley I'd ever seen.

To the left, twenty or thirty Statue-of-Liberty-size giants lined the bar, sitting on stools that would have made fine high-rise condominiums. The giants were dressed in neon-colored bowling shirts they must have stolen from a disco-era Salvation Army. Around their waists hung an assortment of knives, axes, and spiked clubs. They laughed and insulted each other and threw back mugs of mead that each could have watered all the crops in California for a year.

It seemed a little early in the morning for mead, but for all I knew these guys had been partying since 1999. That was the song blasting from the overhead speakers, anyway.

To our right stood an arcade where more giants played pinball and *Ms. Very Large Pac-Man*. In the back of the room, about as far away as, oh, Boston is from New Hampshire, still more giants gathered at the bowling lanes in groups of four or five with matching Day-Glo outfits and suede bowling shoes. A banner across the back wall read: UTGARD BOWLING ULTIMATE TOURNAMENT! WELCOME, U.B.U.T. CONTESTANTS!!

One of the giants threw a ball. Thunder boomed as it rolled down the lane. The floor vibrated, shaking me up and down like a wind-up hoppy toy.

I scanned the place for Tiny in his gray Turkey Bowler shirt. I couldn't spot him. Tiny should have been easy to see, but from our vantage point on the floor, there were just too many other enormous obstacles in the way.

Then the crowd shifted. Across the room, looking right at me, was a giant I wanted to see even less than Tiny. He sat in a tall leather chair on a dais overlooking the lanes like he was the referee or the MC. His bowling shirt was made of eagle feathers. His slacks were brown polyester. His iron-shod boots looked like they'd been made from recycled World War II

destroyers. Clasped around his forearm was a thane's gold ring studded with bloodstones.

His face was angular and handsome in a cruel sort of way. Straight coal-black hair swept his shoulders. His eyes glittered with amusement and malice. He definitely would've made the list for *10 Most Attractive Murderers of Jotunheim*. He was about ninety feet taller than the last time I'd seen him, but I recognized him.

"Big Boy," I said.

I'm not sure how he heard my pipsqueak voice through all the chaos, but he nodded in acknowledgment.

"Magnus Chase!" he called out. "So glad you could make it!"

The music died. At the bar, giants turned to look at us. Big Boy raised his fist as if offering me a microphone. Clasped in his fingers like G.I. Joe figures were Samirah and Hearthstone.



## THIRTY-NINE

### Elvis Has Left the Bowling Bag

“WE CLAIM guest rights!” I yelled. “Utgard-Loki, let our friends go!”

I thought that was pretty brave of me, considering we were facing a heavily armed, badly-dressed Statue of Liberty convention.

The assembled giants laughed.

At the bar, one yelled, “What did you say? Speak up!”

“I said—”

The bartender turned “1999” back on and drowned me out. The giants howled with glee.

I frowned at Blitzen. “You told me Taylor Swift’s songs were dwarf music...does this mean that Prince was a giant?”

“Eh?” Blitzen kept his eyes locked on Hearthstone, who was still trapped and struggling in Utgard-Loki’s fist. “No, kid. This just means that giants have good taste in music. You think Jack could cut our friends out of the giant’s hand?”

“Before Utgard-Loki crushes them? Unlikely.”

Alex wrapped her garrote around her hand, though I didn’t see what good it would do unless she intended to give the giants a good flossing.  
“What’s the plan?”

“I’m working on it.”

Finally, Utgard-Loki made a *cut it* gesture with his finger across his throat. (Not my favorite gesture.) The music shut off again. The giants settled down.

“Magnus Chase, we’ve been expecting you!” Utgard-Loki grinned. “As for your friends, they’re not captives. I was merely lifting them up so they could see that you’ve arrived! I’m sure they are delighted!”

Sam did not look delighted. She twisted her shoulders, trying to break free. Her expression suggested she wanted to kill everyone wearing a bowling shirt and perhaps several people who were not.

As for Hearth, I knew how much he hated having his hands pinned down. He couldn’t communicate, couldn’t do magic. The cold fury in his eyes reminded me of his father, Mr. Alderman, and that was not a similarity I enjoyed seeing.

“Put them down now,” I said, “if they’re really not captives.”

“As you wish!” Utgard-Loki set Sam and Hearth on the table, where they stood about as tall as the giant’s mead cup. “We’ve made them quite comfortable while we waited for you to arrive. Tiny mentioned that you would bring his bowling bag no later than this morning. I was beginning to think you wouldn’t make it!”

The way he phrased that made it seem like this was a hostage exchange. A cold heavy feeling settled in my gut. I wondered what would’ve happened to Sam and Hearth if we’d failed to show up with the bag. We’d kept them waiting, trapped here for twenty-four hours, probably wondering if we were even still alive.

“We’ve got the bag!” I said. “No worries.”

I nudged Blitzen.

“Right!” Blitz stepped forward and raised his creation. “Behold Emptyleather, soon to be famous among bowling bags, completed by Blitzen of Freya! And Jack helped!”

Our old friend Tiny muscled his way through the crowd. Mead stains speckled his gray shirt. His grizzled man bun had unraveled. Just like he’d warned us, compared to the other giants in the room, he actually *did* look tiny.

“What’d you do to my bag?” he cried. “Did you wash it on regular cycle? It’s minuscule!”

“Like you!” another giant catcalled.

“Shut up, Hugo!” Tiny yelled.

“Not to fear!” Blitzen promised, his voice demonstrating what fear sounded like. “I can return the bag to its normal size! But first, I want

assurances from your king that we have guest rights—the three of us, and our two friends on the table.”

Utgard-Loki chuckled. “Well, Tiny, it seems like they did what you asked. They brought your bag.”

Tiny gestured helplessly to his new extra-small carry case. “But...”

“Tiny...” the king said, his tone hardening.

Tiny glared at us. He did not look quite so easygoing now.

“Yes,” he said through gritted teeth. “They have kept their part of their bargain. I vouch for them...in a very, very *small* way.”

“There you have it!” Utgard-Loki beamed. “You are all officially guests in my bowling alley!” He plucked up Sam and Hearth and set them on the floor. Thankfully, the Skofnung Sword and Stone were still strapped across Sam’s back.

The king turned to address the assembled giants. “My friends, if we entertain these guests in our present size, we’ll get eye-strain trying to avoid stepping on them. We’ll have to serve them food with tweezers and fill their teeny drinking glasses with eyedroppers. That’s no fun! Let’s take this party down a few notches, eh?”

The giants grumbled and muttered, but nobody seemed anxious to contradict the king. Utgard-Loki snapped his fingers. The room spun. My stomach churned from disorientation.

The bowling alley shrank from colossal to merely huge. The giants now averaged about seven feet tall. I could look at them without craning my neck or peering up their cavernous nostrils.

Samirah and Hearthstone hurried over to join us.

*You okay?* Blitz signed to Hearth.

*Where were you?* Hearth asked.

Samirah gave me a pained I-will-kill-you-later smile. “I thought you were dead. Also, what happened to your hair?”

“Long story,” I told her.

“Yeah, sorry we’re late,” Alex said. Her apology surprised me more than anything so far today. “What did we miss?”

Sam stared at her like, *If I told you, you wouldn’t believe me.*

I couldn’t imagine that her story was any weirder than ours, but before we could compare notes, Tiny stumbled toward Blitzen. The giant grabbed his bowling bag, which was now just about the right size for him.

He zipped it open and breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank goodness! Elvis!”

He pulled out his bowling ball and examined it for damage. Airbrushed across the surface was a 1970s Elvis Presley in his white rhinestone jumpsuit. “Oh, did they hurt you, baby?” Tiny kissed the ball and hugged it to his chest. He scowled at Blitzen. “You’re lucky you didn’t harm Elvis, little dwarf.”

“I have no interest in harming Elvis.” Blitzen swiped the now-empty bag out of Tiny’s hands. “But I’m keeping Emptyleather for insurance! You can have it back when we leave here unharmed. If you try anything, I should warn you, the bag only changes sizes with the word of command, and you’ll never guess it on your own!”

“What?” Tiny shrieked. “Is it *Presley*?”

“No.”

“Is it *Graceland*?”

“No.”

“Friends, friends!” Utgard-Loki walked toward us with his arms extended. “This is tournament day! We have special guests! Let’s not quibble. Let us feast and compete! Start the music! Drinks for everyone!”

“Little Red Corvette” blasted over the speakers. Most of the giants dispersed, going back to their mead-swilling or their bowling or their Ms. *Not-Quite-So-Large Pac-Man*. Some of the jotuns—especially those in gray shirts like Tiny’s—looked like they wanted to kill us, guest rights or no, but I took comfort in knowing we had a doomsday option. If worse came to worst, we could always shout *password* and destroy the entire building in an avalanche of fine dwarven-embroidered leather.

Utgard-Loki patted Tiny on the back. “That’s right! Go have a Jotun Juice!”

Tiny cradled Elvis and headed for the bar, glowering at us over his shoulder.

“Utgard-Loki,” I said, “we need information—”

“Not now, you idiot.” He maintained his grin, but his tone was a desperate snarl. “Look happy. Look like we’re just joking around.”

“What?”

“Good one!” shouted the giant king. “Ha, ha, ha!”

My friends tried to get into the act. “Yeah, ha, ha!” Sam said. Blitzen let out a good dwarvish belly laugh. “Hilarious!” Alex volunteered.

*H-A, H-A*, Hearth signed.

Utgard-Loki kept smiling at me, but his eyes were as sharp as daggers. “No giant here wants to help you except me,” he said under his breath. “If you don’t prove yourself worthy, you’ll never leave this bowling alley alive.”

“What?” Blitzen hissed. “You promised guest rights. You’re the king!”

“And I’ve used every last bit of my influence and credibility trying to help you! Otherwise you wouldn’t have made it this far alive!”

“*Help us?*” I said. “By killing our goat?”

“And infiltrating Valhalla?” Sam added. “And possessing an innocent flight instructor?”

“All to dissuade you bungling mortals from falling into Loki’s trap. Which, so far, you’ve managed to do *anyway*.” He turned his head and shouted for the onlookers, “Well boasted, little mortal! But you will never beat the giants!”

He lowered his voice again. “Not everyone here thinks Loki *needs* to be stopped. I’ll tell you what you need to know to thwart him, but you’ll have to play along. If you don’t prove your worth and earn the respect of my followers, I’ll be ousted and one of these morons will become the new king. Then we’re *all* dead.”

Alex scanned the crowd as if trying to decide which moron to garrote first. “Look, Your Feathery Majesty, you could’ve just sent us this important information in a text or a phone call days ago. Why all the cloak-and-dagger and the inflatable Godzilla?”

Utgard-Loki wrinkled his nose at her. “I could not *text* you, *child of Loki*, for several reasons. First and foremost, because your father has ways of finding things out. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Alex’s face mottled red, but she said nothing.

“Now,” the king continued, “join the feast. I’ll show you to your table.”

“And after that?” I asked. “How do we prove our worth?”

Utgard-Loki’s eyes gleamed in a way I definitely didn’t like. “You entertain us with impressive feats. You best us in competition. Or you die trying.”



## Little Billy Totally Deserved It

THE BOWLING alley breakfast of champions: peanuts, lukewarm hot dogs, and stale corn chips drizzled in orange goop that bore no resemblance to cheese. The mead was flat and tasted of Sweet’N Low. On the bright side, the portions were giant-size. I hadn’t eaten much since yesterday except for leftover falafel and chocolate. I courageously managed to eat.

At each bowling lane, giants sat grouped by team—throwing food, cracking jokes, and boasting about their pin-destroying prowess.

Sam, Hearthstone, Blitz, Alex, and I sat together on a wraparound plastic bench, picking through our food for the most edible bits and nervously surveying the crowd.

Utgard-Loki had insisted we trade our regular footwear for bowling shoes—all of which were too big and Day-Glo orange and pink. When Blitzen saw his, I thought he was going to go into anaphylactic shock. Alex, however, seemed to like them. At least we didn’t have to wear matching team shirts.

While we ate, we told Sam and Hearth what had happened to us in the woods.

Sam shook her head in disgust. “Magnus, you always get the easy stuff.” I almost choked on a peanut. “Easy?”

“Hearth and I have been here for a day trying to stay alive. We’ve almost died six times.”

Hearth held up seven fingers.

“Oh, right,” Sam said. “The thing with the toilets.”

Blitzen tucked his feet under the bench, no doubt to avoid looking at his hideous shoes. “Didn’t the giants give you guest rights?”

“That was the first thing we asked for,” Sam said. “But these mountain jotuns...they’ll try to twist your words and kill you with kindness.”

“Like those sisters we met in January,” I said. “The ones who offered to raise our seat to table height and then tried to smash us against the ceiling in it.”

Sam nodded. “Yesterday I asked for a drink? The bartender dropped me in a full beer mug. First, I’m Muslim. I don’t drink alcohol. Second, the sides were so slippery I couldn’t get out. If Hearth hadn’t cracked the glass with a rune...”

*Had to watch everything we said, Hearth signed. I asked for a place to sleep...He shuddered. Almost mangled to death in ball-return machine.*

Sam translated for Alex’s sake.

“Ouch.” Alex winced. “No wonder you guys look so bad. No offense.”

“That’s not the worst of it,” Sam said. “Trying to do my prayers with Hearthstone keeping guard? Impossible. And the giants kept challenging us to rigged feats of skill.”

*Illusions*, Hearthstone signed, circling his palms at us simultaneously to represent two shifting images. *Nothing here is what it seems.*

“Yep.” Blitz nodded gravely. “Same with Tiny and his bowling bag. Utgard-Loki and his people are infamous for their powers of illusion.”

I glanced around, wondering how big the giants actually were and what they looked like without magic. Maybe the hideous bowling outfits were mirages meant to disorient us. “So how do you know what’s an illusion and what’s real?”

“Most importantly...” Alex held up a tortilla chip soggy with orange goo. “Can I pretend this is really a burrito from Anna’s Taqueria?”

“We have to stay sharp,” Sam warned. “Last night, after we phrased the request very carefully, they finally gave us sleeping bags, but we had to ‘prove our strength’ by spreading them out ourselves. We tried for about an hour. The bags wouldn’t budge. Utgard-Loki finally admitted they were made from curled shavings of titanium. The giants had a good laugh about that.”

I shook my head. “How is that even funny?”

Hearth signed: *Tell about the cat.*

“Ugh,” Sam agreed. “Then there was the cat. As a ‘favor’ before we got dinner, we were supposed to pick up Utgard-Loki’s cat and put it outside.”

I glanced around, but I saw no cat.

“It’s around here somewhere,” Sam assured me. “Except we couldn’t move it, because the cat was actually a thirteen-thousand-pound African bush elephant. We weren’t even aware until the giants told us later—after we’d tried for hours and missed dinner. They *love* to humiliate their guests by making them feel weak and puny.”

“It’s working,” Blitz muttered.

I imagined trying to pick up an elephant and not realizing it was an elephant. That was usually the sort of thing I would notice.

“How do we combat something like that?” I asked. “We’re supposed to impress them in a bunch of contests? Sorry, there’s not much I can do with titanium sleeping bags and African bush elephants.”

Sam leaned across the table. “Whatever you think is going on, just remember it’s a ruse. Think outside the box. Do something unexpected. Break the rules.”

“Oh,” Alex said. “You mean like every other day in my life.”

“Then your experience should come in handy,” Sam said. “Also, that stuff Utgard-Loki told us about trying to help? I don’t believe a word—”

“Hello, guests!”

For a big guy in a feather bowling shirt, the giant king was stealthy. Utgard-Loki leaned over the railing behind our table, peering down at us, a corn dog in his hand. “We only have a minute or so. Then the games must begin.”

“The games,” Sam said. “Like the ones we’ve been playing since *yesterday*? ”

Utgard-Loki’s eyes matched his eagle-feather shirt. He had that bird-of-prey gaze, like he was about to swoop down and grab a rodent—or perhaps a small human—for dinner. “Now, Samirah, you have to understand. My liege men are already upset that I invited you here. You must be good sports. Provide entertainment, give us a great show, prove that you’re worthy. Don’t expect any kindness from me during the contests. My men will turn on me if I show any preferential treatment.”

“So you’re not much of a king, then,” I noted.

Utgard-Loki sneered. For the benefit of his followers, he shouted, “Is that all you can eat, puny mortals? We have toddlers who can consume

more nachos!” He pointed his corn-dog royal scepter at me and lowered his voice. “You know very little of leading, Magnus Chase. Kingship requires the right combination of iron and mead, fear and generosity. As great as I am at wielding magic, I cannot simply *force* my will upon my giants. They will always outnumber me. I must earn their respect every day. Now *you* must as well.”

Alex leaned away from the king. “If it’s so dangerous for you, why would you help us get back Mjolnir?”

“I care nothing about Thor’s hammer one way or the other! The Aesir have always relied too much on the fear it inspires. It is a mighty weapon, yes, but when Ragnarok comes, Thor will be outnumbered. The gods will die anyway. The hammer is a bluff, an illusion of overwhelming force. And believe a master sorcerer”—the giant grinned—“even the best illusions have their limits. What I care about is not the hammer. I want to stop Loki’s plan.”

Blitzen scratched his beard. “To marry Sam and Thrym? You fear that alliance?”

Utgard-Loki went into acting mode again, shouting for his audience: “Bah! These are the mightiest corn dogs in Jotunheim! None are their equal!” He took a savage bite, then threw the empty stick over his shoulder. “Blitzen, son of Freya, use your head. Of course I fear an alliance. That ugly toad Thrym and his sister, Thrynga, would love to lead Jotunheim into war. With a marriage alliance to Loki *and* the hammer of Thor in his possession, Thrym would become Thane of Thanes.”

Sam’s eyes narrowed. “With Thor’s hammer in his possession? You mean, even if I went through with this wedding—which I won’t—Thrym wouldn’t give back Mjolnir?”

“Oh, wedding gifts will be exchanged! But perhaps not in the way you imagine.” Utgard-Loki reached over and flicked the pommel of the Skofnung Sword, still slung across Sam’s back. “Come, come, my friends. Before I can give you a solution, you must understand the problem. Do you truly not see Loki’s goal?”

From across the room, one of the giants bellowed, “Our king, what of the contests? Why are you flirting with those mortals?”

More giants laughed and wolf-whistled at us.

Utgard-Loki stood tall, grinning at his subjects as if this was all good fun. “Yes, of course! Ladies and jotunmen, let us begin the entertainment!”

He leered down at us. “Honored guests, with what amazing skills will you impress us?”

All the giants turned toward us, obviously anxious to hear what manner of embarrassing failure we would choose. My chief talents were running away and eating falafel, but after a heavy meal of hot dogs and chemically engineered nachos, I doubted I could win a gold medal in either of those categories.

“Don’t be shy!” Utgard-Loki spread his arms. “Who wants to go first? We want to see what you champions of the mortal realms can do! Will you outdrink us? Outrace us? Outwrestle us?”

Samirah stood. I said a silent prayer of thanks for fearless Valkyries. Even when I was a regular mortal student, I hated going first. The teacher always promised to go easier on the first volunteer or give extra credit. No thanks. It wasn’t worth the extra anxiety.

Sam took a deep breath and faced the crowd. “I am handy with the ax,” she said. “Who would challenge me at ax-throwing?”

The giants cheered and catcalled.

“Well, now!” Utgard-Loki looked delighted. “That’s a very small ax you have, Samirah al-Abbas, but I’m sure you throw it with skill. Hmm. Normally I would name Bjorn Cleaveskull as our champion ax-thrower, but I don’t want you to feel *too* outmatched. How about you compete against Little Billy instead?”

From a knot of giants at the far end of the alley, a curly-haired kid giant stood. He looked about ten years old, his pudgy belly stuffed in a Where’s Waldo striped shirt, yellow suspenders holding up his schoolboy knickers. He was also severely cross-eyed. As he walked toward us he kept running into tables and tripping over bowling bags, much to the amusement of the other giants.

“Billy is just learning to throw,” Utgard-Loki said. “But he should be a good match for you.”

Samirah clenched her jaw. “Fine. What are the targets?”

Utgard-Loki snapped his fingers. At the far end of lanes one and three, slots opened in the floor and flat wooden figures shot up, each painted with the likeness of Thor, with his wild red hair and flowing beard, and his face scrunched up the way he looked mid-fart.

“Three throws each!” Utgard-Loki announced. “Samirah, would you like to begin?”

"Oh, no," she said. "Children first."

Little Billy waddled toward the foul line. Next to him, another giant set down a leather bundle and opened it to reveal three tomahawks, each one almost as large as Billy.

Billy struggled to lift the first ax. He squinted at the distant target.

I had time to think, *Maybe Sam will be okay. Maybe Utgard-Loki is going easy on her after all.* Then Billy burst into action. He tossed one ax after another, so fast I could barely follow his movements. When he was done, one hatchet was embedded in Thor's forehead, another in his chest, and a third in the thunder god's mighty crotch.

The giants cheered.

"Not bad!" Utgard-Loki said. "Now, let us see if Samirah, pride of the Valkyries, can defeat a cross-eyed ten-year-old!"

Next to me, Alex muttered, "She's doomed."

"Do we step in?" Blitz worried. "Sam told us to think outside the box."

I remembered her advice: *Do something unexpected.*

I clasped my fingers around my pendant. I wondered if I should jump out of my seat, summon Jack, and cause a distraction by singing a duet of "Love Never Felt So Good." Hearthstone saved me from that embarrassment by raising his fingers: *Wait.*

Sam studied her opponent, Little Billy. She stared at the axes he'd planted in his target. Then she seemed to come to a conclusion. She stepped up to the foul line and raised her ax.

The room went respectfully quiet. Or maybe our hosts were just taking a deep breath so they could laugh really hard when Sam failed.

In one fluid movement, Sam turned and threw her ax right at Billy. The giants gasped.

Little Billy's eyes went even more cross-eyed as he stared at the hatchet now sprouting from his forehead. He fell backward and crashed to the floor.

The giants roared in outrage. Some rose and drew their weapons.

"Hold!" Utgard-Loki bellowed. He glared at Sam. "Explain yourself, Valkyrie! Why should we not kill you for what you just did?"

"Because," Sam said, "it was the only way to win this contest."

She sounded remarkably calm considering what she'd done, and considering the number of giants now ready to rip her apart. She pointed at the corpse of Little Billy. "This is no giant child!"

She announced it with all the authority of a TV detective, but I could see a bead of sweat trickling down from under the edge of her hijab. I could almost hear her thinking: *Please let me be right. Please let me be right.*

The crowd of giants stared at the corpse of Little Billy. He continued to look like a dead, badly-dressed giant child. I knew that at any moment the mob would charge Samirah and we'd all have to flee for our lives.

Then, slowly, the boy giant's form began to change.

His flesh withered until he looked like one of Prince Gellir's draugr. His leathery lips curled over his teeth. Yellow film covered his eyes. His fingernails lengthened into dirty scythes. Little Zombie Billy struggled to his feet and pulled the ax out of his forehead.

He hissed at Sam. A wave of pure terror swept through the room. Some giants dropped their drinks. Others fell to their knees and wept. My intestines tied themselves into a granny knot.

“Y-yes,” Sam announced, her voice much smaller. “As you can see, this is not Little Billy. This is Fear, which strikes quickly and always hits its mark. The only way to conquer Fear is to attack it head-on. That’s what I did. That’s why I win the contest.”

Fear threw down Sam’s ax in disgust. With one final terrifying hiss, he dissolved into white smoke and was gone.

A collective sigh of relief spread through the room. Several giants hastened to the restrooms, probably to throw up or change their underpants.

I whispered to Blitzen, “How the heck did Sam know? How could that thing be Fear?”

Blitzen’s own eyes looked a bit jaundiced. “I—I suppose she’s met Fear before. I’ve heard rumors that the giants are on good terms with a lot of minor deities—Anger, Hunger, Disease. Supposedly, Old Age used to bowl with the Utgard Ultimates—though not well. But I never thought I’d meet Fear in person....”

Alex shuddered. Hearthstone looked grim but not surprised. I wondered if he and Sam had encountered other minor deities during their twenty-four-hour ordeal.

I was glad Sam had gone first and not me. With my luck, I would’ve been pitted against Happiness and I would’ve had to whack it with my sword until it stopped smiling.

Utgard-Loki turned to Sam with a tiny glint of admiration in his eyes. “I suppose we will not kill you, then, Samirah al-Abbas, since you did what

was necessary to win. This round goes to you!"

Sam's shoulders sagged with relief. "Then we have proven ourselves? The contest is over?"

"Oh, not yet!" The king's eyes widened. "What about our four other guests? We must see if they are as skilled as you!"



## FORTY-ONE

### When in Doubt, Turn Into a Biting Insect

I WAS STARTING to hate the Utgard Bowling Ultimate Tournament.

Hearthstone went next. He gestured to the arcade and, with me translating, challenged the giants to bring forth their highest scorer at any game of the contestants' choosing. Hugo's Jotun Jammers team nominated a guy named Kyle, who marched over to the skee-ball lane and scored a perfect thousand points. While the giants cheered, Hearthstone walked to the *Starsky and Hutch* pinball machine and put a red gold coin in the slot.

"Wait!" Hugo protested. "That's not even the same game!"

"It doesn't have to be," I said. "Hearth said 'any game of the contestants' choosing,' plural. Your guy chose skee-ball. Hearth chooses pinball."

The giants grumbled, but in the end they relented.

Blitzen grinned at me. "You're in for a treat, kid. Hearth is a wizard."

"I know that."

"No, I mean a pinball wizard."

Hearthstone fired up the first ball. I didn't see him use any magic, but he quickly destroyed Kyle's score—which, granted, wasn't fair, since pinball scores go way higher than a thousand points. Even after he'd passed five hundred million, Hearth kept playing. He nudged the machine and hit the flippers with such intensity I wondered if he was thinking of his father and all those coins he'd made Hearth collect for good deeds. On this machine, Hearth quickly became a make-believe billionaire.

“Enough!” Utgard-Loki yelled, pulling the plug on the machine. “You’ve proved your skill! I think we can all agree that this deaf elf sure plays a mean pinball. Who’s next?”

Blitzen challenged the giants to a complete makeover. He promised he could turn *any* giant into someone more dashing and fashionable. The giants unanimously elected a jotun named Grum, who had apparently been sleeping under the bar—and collecting grime and lint there—for the past forty years. I was pretty sure he was the minor deity Bad Hygiene.

Blitzen was not deterred. He whipped out his sewing implements and got to work. It took him a few hours to slap together new clothes from odds and ends in the bowling alley’s gift shop. Then he took Grum into the bathroom for a proper spa treatment. When they emerged, Grum’s eyebrows had been waxed. His beard and hair were trimmed neater than the most metrosexual hipster’s. He wore a shimmery gold bowling shirt with GRUM stitched across the front, along with silvery pants and matching bowling shoes. The giant ladies swooned. The giant dudes edged away from him, intimidated by his star power. Grum crawled back under the bar and started to snore.

“I can’t fix bad habits!” Blitz said. “But you saw him. Did I beat the challenge or what?”

There was a lot of muttering, but no one dared to argue. Even magically enhanced ugliness was no match for a dwarven degree in fashion design.

Utgard-Loki leaned toward me and murmured, “You’re doing very well! I’ll have to make this last challenge really hard so you have a high chance of dying. That should solidify my liege men’s respect.”

“Wait, *what?*”

The helpful king raised his hands to the crowd. “Ladies and jotunmen! Truly we have some interesting guests, but never fear! We will have our revenge! Two guests remain. As fate would have it, that’s the perfect number for a doubles bowling challenge. Since bowling is the reason we are here today, let’s have our last two visitors face off against our defending champions from Tiny’s Turkey Bowlers!”

The giants hollered and whooped. Tiny looked over at me and made the finger-across-the-throat sign—which I was getting really tired of seeing.

“The winners will take the usual prize,” Utgard-Loki announced, “which is, of course, the losers’ heads!”

I glanced at Alex Fierro and realized we were now a team.

“I suppose this is a bad time to tell you,” Alex said, “I’ve never bowled.”

Our opponents from Tiny's Turkey Bowlers were brothers with the delightful names of Herg and Blerg. It was difficult to tell them apart. In addition to being identical twins, they wore matching gray shirts and football helmets—the latter probably to keep us from throwing axes at their faces. The only differences I could see were their bowling balls. Herg's was airbrushed with the face of Prince. (Maybe he had provided the bar's playlist.) His brother Blerg had a red ball with Kurt Cobain's face on it. Blerg kept looking back and forth between me and the ball like he was trying to imagine me without the choppy haircut.

"All right, my friends!" Utgard-Loki announced. "We'll be playing an abbreviated game of three frames!"

Alex leaned toward me. "What's a frame?"

"*Shh,*" I told her. In fact, I was trying to remember the rules of bowling. It had been years since I'd played. There was an alley in Hotel Valhalla, but since the einherjar did most everything to the death, I hadn't been anxious to check it out.

"A very simple contest!" Utgard-Loki continued. "Highest score wins. First team up: the Insignificant Mortals!"

Nobody cheered as Alex and I walked to our ball return.

"What do you think?" Alex whispered.

"Basically," I said, "you're supposed to roll the ball down the lane and knock over the pins."

She glared at me, her pale eye twice as bright and angry as her dark one. "I know *that* much. But we're supposed to break the rules, right? What's the illusion here? You think Herg and Blerg are minor gods?"

I glanced back at Sam, Blitz, and Hearth, who'd been forced to watch from behind the railing. Their expressions told me nothing I didn't already know: we were in serious trouble.

I wrapped my fingers around my pendant and thought: *Hey, Jack, any advice?*

Jack hummed sleepily, as he tends to do in pendant form. *No.*

*Thanks,* I thought. *Huge assist from the magic sword.*

"Insignificant Mortals!" Utgard-Loki called. "Is there a problem? Do you wish to forfeit?"

"No!" I said. "No, we're good."

I took a deep breath. "Okay, Alex, we've got three frames. Uh, three rounds of play. Let's just see how the first frame goes. Maybe it'll give us

some ideas. Watch how I bowl.”

That’s a statement I never thought I would utter. Bowling was *not* one of my superpowers. Nevertheless, I stepped into the approach with my pink fuzzy-dice-themed bowling ball. (Hey, it was the only one that fit my fingers.) I tried to remember the pointers my shop teacher, Mr. Gent, had given us when we had our middle school orientation party at the Lucky Strike Lanes. I reached the line, aimed, and threw with all my einherji might.

The ball rolled slowly, sluggishly, and stopped halfway down the lane.

The giants howled with laughter.

I retrieved the ball and walked back, my face burning. As I passed Alex, she grumbled, “Thanks, that was very instructive.”

I returned to my seat. Behind the railing, Sam looked grim. Hearthstone signed his most helpful advice: *Do better*. Blitzen grinned and gave me two thumbs up, which made me wonder if he understood the rules of bowling.

Alex came to the line. She did a granny roll, hefting the ball between her legs and chucking it down the lane. The dark blue sphere bounced once, twice, then rolled a little farther than mine had before toppling into the gutter.

More laughter from the jotun crowd. A few high-fived each other. Gold coins exchanged hands.

“Time for the Turkey Bowlers!” Utgard-Loki shouted.

A roar of applause as Herg stepped to the next lane over.

“Hold up,” I said. “Aren’t they supposed to use the same lane as us?”

Tiny pushed through the crowd, his eyes wide with mock innocence. “Oh, but the king didn’t say anything about that! He just said ‘highest score wins.’ Go ahead, boys!”

Herg threw Prince’s head. It rolled straight down the middle at lightning speed and crashed into the pins with a sound like an exploding marimba.

Giants cheered and pumped their fists. Herg turned, grinning behind the face mask of his helmet. He patted Blerg on the shoulder and they exchanged a few words.

“I need to figure out what they’re saying,” Alex said. “I’ll be back.”

“But—”

“I NEED TO PEE!” Alex yelled.

Some of the giants frowned at this interruption, but generally when someone yells *I need to pee* in a crowd, people let them go pee. The other options are not great.

Alex disappeared into the little giant girls' room. Meanwhile, Blerg came to the approach. He hefted his Kurt Cobain ball and rolled it down the lane, Cobain's face flashing in and out of sight, saying *hello, hello, hello*, until it crashed into the pins and sent them flying with lots of rocker spirit.

"Another strike!" Tiny yelled.

Cheering and mead-drinking all around—except among me and my friends.

Blerg and Herg rendezvoused at the ball return, snickering and glancing in my direction. While the crowd was still celebrating and making new bets, Alex returned from the restroom.

"I HAVE FINISHED PEEING!" she announced.

She hurried over and grabbed my arm. "I just heard Herg and Blerg talking," she whispered.

"How?"

"I eavesdropped. I do this thing where I turn into a horsefly."

"Oh." I glanced at Sam, who was frowning severely. "I'm familiar with the horsefly thing."

"*Their* lane is a normal bowling lane," Alex reported. "But ours...I dunno. I heard Herg say, 'Good luck to them, hitting the White Mountains.'"

"The White Mountains," I repeated. "In New Hampshire?"

Alex shrugged. "Unless they have White Mountains in Jotunheim, too. Either way, those aren't bowling pins."

I squinted at the end of our lane, but the pins still looked like pins, not mountains. Then again, Little Billy hadn't looked like Fear...until he did.

I shook my head. "How is it possible...?"

"No clue," Alex said. "But if our bowling balls are rolling toward a mountain range on a different world—"

"We'll never reach the end of the lane. We definitely won't be able to knock down any pins. How do we undo the hex?"

"Come on, Insignificant Mortals!" Tiny yelled. "Stop stalling!"

It was hard to think with a crowd of giants yelling at me. "I—I'm not sure," I told Alex. "I need more time. Right now, the best thing I can think of is to sabotage *their* lane."

It was impulsive, I'll admit. But I charged the foul line and threw my pink dice bowling ball overhand with all my strength, straight into Herg and Blerg's lane. The ball landed with such force it cracked the hardwood floor,

ricocheted backward into the crowd, and felled one of the spectators, who squawked like a startled chicken.

“OHHHH!” the onlookers yelled.

“What was that?” Tiny bellowed. “You brained Eustis!”

Utgard-Loki scowled and rose from his throne. “Tiny is right, mortal. You can’t cross-bowl. Once you’ve chosen a lane, you must stick to it.”

“Nobody said that,” I protested.

“Well, I’m saying it now! Continue the frame!”

A giant in the audience rolled my dice ball back to me.

I looked at Alex, but I had no advice to offer her. How do you bowl when your target is a distant mountain range?

Alex muttered something under her breath. As she made her approach, she changed into a full-size grizzly bear. She waddled on her back legs, the bowling ball clutched in her front paws. She reached the foul line and came down on all fours, hurling the ball forward with three hundred pounds of pure force. The ball almost made it to the first pin before stalling.

A collective sigh of relief went up from the giants.

“Now it’s our turn!” Tiny rubbed his palms eagerly. “Go on, boys!”

“But, boss!” Herg said. “Our lane has a big dent in it.”

“Just move over a lane,” Tiny said.

“Oh, no,” I said. “You heard the king: once you’ve chosen a lane, you must stick to it.”

Tiny growled. Even the Elvis tattoo on his arm looked angry. “Fine! Herg, Blerg, just do your best. You already have an unbeatable lead!”

Herg and Blerg didn’t look happy, but they bowled their second frame. They managed to avoid the dent in the lane, but both of them rolled gutter balls, adding no points to their score.

“That’s all right!” Tiny assured them. He sneered at Alex and me. “I was tempted to step on you two in the forest, but now I’m glad I didn’t. Unless you bowl a perfect last frame, you can’t even *tie* their score. Let’s see what you’ve got, mortals. I can’t wait to cut off your heads!”



## FORTY-TWO

# Or You Could Just Glow a Lot. That Works, Too

SOME PEOPLE like energy drinks. Me? I find that the threat of imminent beheading wakes me up just fine.

Panicked, I looked back at my friends. Hearthstone signed: *F-R-E-Y*.

*Yes, Hearth, I thought, he is my father.*

But how that helped me, I wasn't sure. It wasn't like the god of summer was going to appear in a blaze of glory and knock down the White Mountains for me. He was the god of the outdoors. He wouldn't be caught dead in a bowling alley....

An idea started trickling through my brain like maple syrup. Outdoors. The White Mountains. Frey's power. Sumarbrander, Frey's sword, which could cut openings between the worlds. And something Utgard-Loki had said earlier: *Even the best illusions have their limits.*

“Insignificant Mortals!” Utgard-Loki called. “Do you forfeit?”

“No!” I yelled. “Just a second.”

“Do you need to pee?”

“No! I just...I need to confer with my teammate before we are brutally decapitated.”

Utgard-Loki shrugged. “That seems fair. Proceed.”

Alex leaned in. “Please tell me you have an idea.”

“You said you've been to Bridal Veil Falls. You've gone camping in the White Mountains a lot?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Is there any way those bowling pins could actually *be* the White Mountains?”

She frowned. “No. I can’t believe anybody would be powerful enough to teleport an entire mountain range into a bowling alley.”

“I agree. My theory is...those pins are just bowling pins. The giants couldn’t bring a mountain range into a bowling alley, but they can send our bowling balls *out* of the alley. There’s some kind of portal between the worlds right in the middle of our lane. It’s hidden by illusions or whatever, but it’s sending our bowling balls to New Hampshire.”

Alex stared at the end of the lane. “Well if that’s the case, why did my ball come back in the ball return?”

“I don’t know! Maybe they loaded an identical ball into the ball return so you wouldn’t notice.”

Alex gritted her teeth. “Those cheating meinfretrs. What do we do about it?”

“You know the White Mountains,” I said. “So do I. I want you to look down the lane and concentrate on seeing those mountains. If we both do it at the same time, we might be able to make the portal visible. And then, maybe, I can dispel it.”

“You mean by changing our perception?” Alex asked. “Sort of like...the mind healing you did with Amir?”

“I guess....” I wished I had more confidence in my own plan. The way Alex described it made me sound like a New Age guru. “But, look, it would work better if I held your hand. And...I can’t promise I won’t, you know, sense stuff about your life.”

I could see her wavering, weighing the options.

“So I can either lose my head or have you in my head,” she grumbled. “Tough choice.” She grabbed my hand. “Let’s do it.”

I studied the far end of the lane. I imagined a portal between us and the pins—a window looking out on the White Mountains. I remembered how excited I used to get on those weekend drives with my mom when she first spotted the mountains on the horizon: *Look, Magnus, we’re getting close!*

I drew on the power of Frey. Warmth radiated through me. My hand in Alex Fierro’s began to steam. A brilliant gold light surrounded us both—like the midsummer sun burning away fog and destroying shadows.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw giants wincing and shielding their faces. “Stop that!” Tiny cried. “You’re blinding us!”

I stayed focused on the bowling pins. The light grew brighter. Random thoughts from Alex Fierro whisked through my mind—her fatal fight with the wolves; a dark-haired man in tennis clothes towering over her, screaming that she should get out and stay out; a group of teenagers standing around ten-year-old Alex and kicking her, calling her a freak as she curled into a ball, trying to protect herself, too panicked and terrified to shape-shift.

Anger burned in my chest. I wasn't sure if it was my emotion or Alex's, but we'd both had enough of illusions and pretending.

"There," Alex said.

In the middle of the lane, a shimmering rift appeared, like the ones Jack cut between the worlds. On the other side, in the distance, was the snow-marbled summit of Mount Washington. Then the portal burned away. The golden light faded around us, leaving a regular lane with bowling pins at the end, just as it had looked before.

Alex pulled her hand away. She quickly wiped away a tear. "Did we do it?"

I wasn't sure what to say.

"Insignificant Mortals!" Utgard-Loki interrupted. "What was that? Do you always confer with each other by generating a blinding light?"

"Sorry!" I yelled to the crowd. "We're ready now!"

At least I *hoped* we were ready. Maybe we'd succeeded in burning away the illusion and closing the portal. Or maybe Utgard-Loki was just allowing me to *think* I'd dispelled his trick. It could be an illusion within an illusion. I decided there was no point overtaxing my brain in the last few minutes it might be on my neck.

I raised my bowling ball. I stepped to the foul line and rolled that stupid pink fuzzy-dice ball straight down the middle.

I have to tell you, the sound of the pins falling was the most beautiful thing I'd heard all day. (Sorry, Prince. You were a close second.)

Blitzen screamed, "Strike!"

Samirah and Hearthstone hugged each other, which wasn't something either of them tended to do.

Alex's eyes widened. "It worked? It worked!"

I grinned at her. "Now all you have to do is knock down all your pins and we tie. Do you have any shape-shifting form that could—?"

"Oh, don't worry." Her wicked smile was one hundred percent from her mother, Loki. "I've got it covered."

She grew to immense size, her arms morphing into thick forelegs, her skin turning wrinkled gray, her nose elongating into a twenty-foot trunk.

Alex was now an African bush elephant, though one confused giant in the back of the room screamed, “She’s a cat!”

Alex picked up the bowling ball with her trunk. She stormed the foul line and hurled the ball, stomping with all her weight and shaking the entire alley. Not only did her bowling ball knock down the pins, the force of her stomping obliterated the pins in all twelve lanes, making Alex the first elephant in history, as far I knew, to score a perfect 300, twelve strikes, with only one throw.

I may have jumped up and down and clapped like a five-year-old girl who had just gotten a pony. (What did I say about not judging?) Sam, Hearth, and Blitz rushed us and tackled us in a big group hug while the crowd of giants looked on sourly.

Herg and Blerg threw down their football helmets.

“We can’t beat that score!” Herg wailed. “Just take our heads!”

“The mortals are cheaters!” Tiny complained. “First they shrunk my bag and insulted Elvis! Now they’ve dishonored the Turkey Bowlers!”

The giants began to advance on us.

“Hold!” Utgard-Loki raised his arms. “This is my still bowling alley, and these competitors have won...uh, squarely, if not fairly.” He turned to us. “The normal prize is yours. Would you like the severed heads of Herg and Blerg?”

Alex and I looked at each other. We tacitly agreed that severed heads really wouldn’t go with the décor in our hotel rooms.

“Utgard-Loki,” I said, “all we want is the information you promised.”

The king faced the crowd. He spread his palms like *what ya gonna do?* “My friends, you must admit these mortals have spunk. As much as we tried to humiliate them, they humiliated us instead. And is there anything we mountain giants respect more than the ability to humiliate one’s enemies?”

The other giants murmured in reluctant agreement.

“I wish to help them!” Utgard-Loki announced. “I believe they have proven their worth. How much time will you give me?”

I didn’t quite understand the question, but the giants muttered among themselves. Tiny stepped forward. “I say five minutes. All in favor?”

“Aye!” shouted the crowd.

Utgard-Loki bowed. “More than fair. Come, my guests, let’s talk outside.”

As he steered us through the bar and out the front doors, I said, “Uh, what happens after five minutes?”

“Hmm?” Utgard-Loki smiled. “Oh, then my liege men are free to chase you down and kill you. You *did* humiliate them, after all.”



## FORTY-THREE

### You Keep Using the Word *Help*. I Do Not Think It Means What You Think It Means

UTGARD-LOKI ESCORTED us around the back of the bowling alley. He led us down an icy path into a wide expanse of forest while I peppered him with questions like “Chase us? Kill us? What?” He just patted me on the shoulder and chuckled as if we were sharing a joke.

“You all did well!” he said as we walked. “Normally we have boring guests like Thor. I tell him, ‘Thor, drink this mead.’ He just tries and tries! It doesn’t even occur to him that the mead cup is connected to the ocean and he can’t possibly drain it.”

“How do you connect a mead cup to the ocean?” Sam asked. “Wait, never mind. We have more important matters.”

“Five minutes?” I demanded again.

The giant pounded me on the back like he was trying to dislodge something—perhaps my throat or my heart. “Ah, Magnus! I have to confess, when you threw that first frame, I got nervous. Then the second frame... well, sheer force never would have worked, but nice try. Alex, your ball almost reached the Taco Bell on I-93 south of Manchester.”

“Thanks,” said Alex. “That’s what I was going for.”

“But then you two broke the illusion!” Utgard-Loki beamed. “That was first-rate thinking. And of course, the elf’s pinball skills, the dwarf’s accessorizing, Sam hitting Fear in the face with an ax—well done, all around! It’s going to be an honor slaughtering the four of you at Ragnarok.”

Blitzen snorted. “The feeling is mutual. Now I think you owe us some information.”

“Yes, of course.” Utgard-Loki changed form. Suddenly the goat-killer stood before us in his black furs, soot-smeared chain mail, and iron helm, his face covered by a sneering wolf faceplate.

“Could you lose the mask?” I asked. “Please?”

Utgard-Loki flipped up his visor. Underneath, his face looked the same as before, his dark eyes gleaming murderously. “Tell me, my friends, have you figured out Loki’s true goal?”

Hearthstone crossed one palm over the other, made his hands into fists, then pulled them apart as if ripping a sheet: *Destroy*.

Utgard-Loki chuckled. “Even *I* understood that sign. Yes, my pinball wizard, Loki wants to destroy his enemies. But that is not his primary concern at the moment.” He turned to Sam and Alex. “You two are his children. Surely you know.”

Samirah and Alex exchanged an uncomfortable look. They had a silent, very sibling-like conversation: *Do you know? No, I thought you knew! I don’t know; I thought you knew!*

“He led you to the wight’s barrow,” Utgard-Loki prompted. “Despite my best efforts, you went there. And?”

“There was no hammer,” Blitzen said. “Just a sword. A sword I hate very much.”

“Exactly...” The giant waited for us to put the pieces together. I always hated it when teachers did that. I wanted to scream: *I don’t like puzzles!*

Nevertheless, I saw where he was going. The idea had been forming in my head for a long time, I guess, but my subconscious had been trying to suppress it. I remembered my vision of Loki lying in his cave, tied to pillars of rock with the hardened guts of his own murdered children. I remembered the serpent dripping poison in his face, and the way Loki had vowed: *Soon enough, Magnus!*

“Loki wants his freedom,” I said.

Utgard-Loki threw back his head and laughed. “We have a winner! Of course, Magnus Chase. That’s what Loki has wanted for a thousand years.”

Samirah raised her palm to push the thought away. “No, that can’t happen.”

“And yet,” Utgard-Loki said, “strapped to your back is the very weapon that could free him—the Skofnung Sword!”

My necklace started to choke me, the pendant tugging its way across my collarbone as if trying to get closer to Sam. Jack must have woken up when he heard *Skofnung*. I yanked him back, which probably made me look like I had a flea in my shirt.

“This has never been about Thor’s hammer,” I realized. “Loki is after the sword.”

Utgard-Loki shrugged. “Well, the theft of the hammer was a good catalyst. I imagine Loki whispered in Thrym’s ear, giving him the idea. After all, Thrym’s grandfather once stole Thor’s hammer and it didn’t go so well. Thrym and his sister have been aching for revenge against the thunder god their entire lives.”

“Thrym’s grandfather?” I remembered the wording on the wedding invitation: *Thrym, son of Thrym, son of Thrym*.

Utgard-Loki waved aside my question. “You can ask Thor about it when you see him, which I’m sure will be very soon. The point is, Loki advised Thrym on the theft and set up a scenario in which a group of champions such as yourselves would have no choice but to try retrieving the hammer...and in the process, you might bring Loki what he really wants.”

“Wait.” Alex cupped her hands as if wrestling a lump of clay on the wheel. “We’re bringing the sword to give to Thrym. How does that—?”

“The bride-price.” Sam suddenly looked sick. “Oh, I’m such a fool.”

Blitz scowled. “Uh...granted, I’m a dwarf. I don’t understand your patriarchal traditions, but isn’t the bride-price something you give to the groom?”

Sam shook her head. “I was so busy denying that this wedding would ever happen, pushing it out of my head, I didn’t think about...about the Old Norse wedding traditions.”

“Which are also jotun traditions,” Utgard-Loki agreed.

Hearthstone sniffed like he was dispelling something unpleasant from his nose. He spelled out: *m-u-n-d-r*?

“Yes, the mundr,” Sam said, “the Old Norse term for bride-price. It doesn’t go to the groom. It goes to the father of the bride.”

We stopped in the middle of the woods. Behind us, Utgard Lanes was barely visible, its neon sign washing the trunks of the trees with red-and-gold light.

“You mean all this time,” I said, “with the Skofnung Sword and the Skofnung Stone, we’ve been running around collecting gifts for *Loki*? ”

The giant king chuckled. “It *is* pretty funny, except for the fact that Loki wants to get free so he can kill everyone.”

Sam leaned against the nearest tree. “And the hammer...that’s the morning gift?”

“Exactly!” the giant agreed. “The *morgen-gifu*.”

Alex tilted her head. “The *what-tofu*? ”

Hearthstone signed: *Gift to bride from groom. Only given after wedding is...His fingers failed him. Complete. Morning after.*

“I’m going to throw up,” Samirah said.

I translated Hearth’s words for Alex.

“So, the hammer goes to you...” Alex pointed to Sam. “Hypothetically, if you were the bride, which you won’t be. But only after the wedding night, and...Yeah, I’m going to be sick, too.”

“Oh, it gets worse!” the giant said with a little too much glee. “The morning gift belongs to the bride, but it’s held in trust by the groom’s family. Therefore, even if you go through with the marriage and get Thor’s hammer back—”

“It just stays with Thrym,” I said. “The giants get a marriage alliance *and* the hammer.”

“And Loki gets the Skofnung Sword.” Sam swallowed hard. “No, this still doesn’t make sense. Loki can’t attend the wedding in the flesh. The best he can do is send a manifestation. His physical body will still be stuck in the cavern where he’s imprisoned.”

“Which is impossible to find,” Blitzen said. “Impossible to access.”

Utgard-Loki gave us a twisted smile. “Like the island of Lyngvi?”

Unfortunately, Utgard-Loki had a point, and that made me want to join Sam at the throw-up tree. Fenris Wolf’s place of imprisonment was supposed to be a closely kept secret among the gods, but that hadn’t stopped us from having a small convention there back in January.

“And the sword,” Blitzen continued. “Why Skofnung? Why not Sumarbrander or some other magic weapon?”

“I’m not entirely sure,” Utgard-Loki admitted. “Nor am I sure how Loki would get the sword to his true location or use it. But I’ve heard Loki’s bonds are *quite* hard to break, being iron-hardened guts—strong, sticky, and corrosive. They will dull any sword, even the sharpest. You could perhaps cut one bond with Sumarbrander, but after that the blade would be useless.”

Jack’s pendant buzzed unhappily.

*Calm down, buddy, I thought. Nobody's going to make you cut iron-hardened guts.*

“Same with Skofnung...” Blitzen cursed. “Of course! The blade has a magical whetstone. It can be sharpened as many times as necessary. That’s why Loki needed both sword and stone.”

The giant king slow-clapped. “Ah, with only a *little* help, you put it together. Well done!”

Blitz and Hearth glanced at each other like, *Now that we've put it together, can we please take it apart again?*

“So we find another way to get the hammer,” I said.

The giant snickered. “Good luck. It’s buried somewhere eight miles under the earth, where even Thor can’t reach it. The only way to retrieve it is to convince Thrym to do so.”

Alex crossed her arms. “I’ve heard a lot of bad news from you, giant. I still haven’t heard anything I would call *helpful*.”

“Knowledge is always helpful!” Utgard-Loki said. “But as I see it, there are two options going forward to thwart Loki. First option: I kill you all and take the Skofnung Sword, thus preventing it from falling into Loki’s hands.”

Sam’s hand crept to her ax. “I’m not liking option one.”

The giant shrugged. “Well, it’s simple, effective, and relatively foolproof. It doesn’t get you the hammer back, but as I said, I don’t care about that. My main concern is keeping Loki in captivity. If he gets free, he starts Ragnarok right *now*, and I, for one, am not ready. We have ladies’ night at the bowling alley on Friday. Doomsday would completely mess that up.”

“If you wanted to kill us,” I said, “you could’ve done it already.”

Utgard-Loki grinned. “I know! I’ve been on pins and needles! But, my tiny friends, there’s a riskier option with a higher payoff. I was waiting to see if you were capable of pulling it off. After your performance in the contests, I think you are.”

“All those challenges,” Sam said. “You were testing us to see whether or not we were worth keeping alive?”

Hearthstone made a few hand signs I decided not to translate, though the meaning seemed clear enough to Utgard-Loki.

“Now, now, pinball wizard,” the giant said. “No need to get testy. If I let you go, and if you can beat Loki at his own game, then I get the same rewards, plus the satisfaction of knowing the upstart god of mischief has

been humiliated with my help. As I may have mentioned, we mountain giants *love* humiliating our enemies.”

“And for engineering that humiliation,” Alex said, “you gain respect from your followers.”

Utgard-Loki bowed modestly. “Maybe in the process you get Thor’s hammer back. Maybe you don’t. I don’t really care. In my opinion, Thor’s hammer is nothing but an Asgardian boondoggle, and you can tell Thor I said so.”

“I wouldn’t,” I said, “even if I knew what that meant.”

“Make me proud!” Utgard-Loki said. “Find a way to change the rules of Loki’s game, the way you did today at our feast. Surely you can come up with a plan.”

“That’s option two?” Alex demanded. “‘Do it yourself’? That’s the extent of your help?”

Utgard-Loki clasped his hands to his chest. “I’m hurt. I’ve given you *a lot!* Besides, our five minutes is up.”

A *BOOM* reverberated through the woods—the sound of barroom doors being thrown open—followed by the roar of infuriated giants.

“Hurry along now, little ones!” Utgard-Loki urged. “Go find Thor and tell him what you’ve learned. If my liege men catch you...well, I’m afraid they are *big* fans of option one!”



## FORTY-FOUR

### We Are Honored with Runes and Coupons

I'D BEEN CHASED by Valkyries. I'd been chased by elves with firearms. I'd been chased by dwarves with a tank. Now, lucky me, I got to be chased by giants with giant bowling balls.

One of these days, I would love to exit a world without being pursued by an angry mob.

"Run!" Blitz yelled, like this idea hadn't occurred to us.

The five of us raced through the woods, jumping over fallen trees and tangled roots. Behind us, the giants grew with every step. One moment they were twelve feet tall. The next they were twenty feet tall.

I felt like I was being pursued by a tidal wave. Their shadows overtook us, and I realized there was no hope.

Blitzen bought us a few seconds. With a curse, he tossed the bag Emptyleather behind us and yelled, "Password!" The mob of giants abruptly found their path blocked by the appearance of Mount Bowling Bag, but they quickly grew tall enough to step right over it. Soon we would be trampled. Even Jack couldn't help against so many.

Hearthstone sprinted ahead, frantically gesturing *Come on!* He pointed to a tree with slender branches, clusters of red berries just ripening in their green foliage. The ground beneath was strewn with white flower petals. The tree definitely stood out among the huge pines of Jotunheim, but I didn't understand why Hearth was so anxious to die in that particular location.

Then the trunk of the tree opened like a door. A lady stepped out and called, “Here, my heroes!”

She had fine elfish features and long hair of red gold, rich and warm and lustrous. Her orange-red dress was clasped at the shoulder with a green-and-silver brooch.

My first thought: *It's a trap.* My experience with Yggdrasil had given me a healthy fear of jumping through doorways in trees. Second thought: The lady looked like one of the dryad tree spirits my cousin Annabeth had described, though I didn't know what one would be doing in Jotunheim.

Sam didn't hesitate. She sprinted after Hearthstone as the red-gold woman stretched out her hand and cried, “Hurry, hurry!”

That also seemed like pretty obvious advice to me.

The sky above turned midnight black. I glanced up and saw the yacht-size sole of a giant's bowling shoe ready to stomp us flat. The red-gold lady pulled Hearth inside the tree. Sam leaped through next, followed by Alex. Blitz was struggling with his shorter stride, so I grabbed him and jumped. Just as the giant's boot came down, the world was snuffed out in absolute, silent darkness.

I blinked. I seemed to be not dead. Blitzen was struggling to get out from under my arm, so I deduced he wasn't dead either.

Suddenly, I was blinded by a dazzling light. Blitz grunted in alarm. I got him to his feet as he scrambled to put on his pith helmet. Only when he was safely covered up did I scan our surroundings.

We stood in a lavish room that was *definitely* not a bowling alley. Above us, a nine-sided glass pyramid let in the daylight. Floor-to-ceiling windows surrounded the chamber, giving us a penthouse-level view over the rooftops of Asgard. In the distance, I could make out Valhalla's main dome.

Hammered from a hundred thousand gold shields, it looked like the shell of the world's fanciest armadillo.

The chamber we were in seemed to be an interior atrium. Ringing the circumference were nine trees, each like the one we'd stepped through in Jotunheim. In the center, in front of a raised dais, a fire crackled cheerfully and smokelessly in the hearth. And on the dais was a chair elaborately carved from white wood.

The woman with the red-gold hair climbed the steps and seated herself on the throne.

Like her hair, everything about her was graceful, flowing, and bright. The movement of her dress reminded me of a field of red poppies swaying in a warm summer breeze.

“Welcome, heroes,” said the goddess. (Oh, yeah. SPOILER ALERT. By this point, I was pretty sure she was a goddess.)

Hearthstone rushed forward. He knelt at the foot of the throne. I hadn’t seen him so awestruck since...well, ever—not even when he was facing Odin himself.

He finger-spelled: *S-I-F*.

“Yes, my dear Hearthstone,” said the goddess. “I am Sif.”

Blitz scrambled to Hearth’s side and also knelt. I wasn’t much of a kneeler, but I gave the lady a bow and managed not to fall over in the process. Alex and Sam just stood there looking mildly disgruntled.

“My lady,” Sam said with obvious reluctance, “why have you brought us to Asgard?”

Sif wrinkled her delicate nose. “Samirah al-Abbas, the Valkyrie. And this one is Alex Fierro, the...new einherji.” Even Officers Sunspot and Wildflower would have approved of her look of distaste. “I saved your lives. Is that not cause to be grateful?”

Blitz cleared his throat. “My lady, Sam just meant—”

“I can speak for myself,” Sam said. “Yes, I appreciate the rescue, but it was awfully convenient timing. Have you been watching us?”

The goddess’s eyes flashed like coins underwater. “Of course I have been watching you, Samirah. But obviously I couldn’t retrieve you until you had the information to help my husband.”

I looked around. “Your husband...is Thor?”

I couldn’t imagine the thunder god living in a place so clean and pretty, with an unbroken glass ceiling and windows. Sif seemed so refined, so graceful, so unlikely to fart or belch in public.

“Yes, Magnus Chase.” Sif spread her arms. “Welcome to our home, Bilskirnir—the renowned palace Bright Crack!”

All around us, a heavenly chorus sang *Ahhhhhhh!* then shut off as abruptly as it had begun.

Blitzen helped Hearthstone to his feet. I didn’t know godly etiquette, but I guessed once the heavenly chorus sounded, you were allowed to get up.

“The largest mansion in Asgard!” Blitzen marveled. “I have heard stories of this place. And such a fine name, Bilskirnir!”

Another chorus rang out. *Ahhhhhhh!*

“Bright Crack?” Alex didn’t even wait for the angels to finish before asking, “Do you live next door to Plumber’s Crack?”

Sif frowned. “I do not like this one. I may send it back to Jotunheim.”

“Call me *it* again,” Alex snarled. “Just try.”

I put my arm in front of her like a guardrail, though I knew I was risking amputation by clay-cutter. “Um, Sif, so maybe you could tell us why we’re here?”

Sif’s eyes settled on me. “Yes, of course, son of Frey. I’ve always liked Frey. He’s quite handsome.” She fluffed her hair. Somehow I got the feeling that by *handsome* Sif meant *likely to make my husband jealous*.

“As I said,” she continued, “I am Thor’s wife. That’s all most people know about me, sadly, but I am also a goddess of the earth. It was a simple matter for me to track your movements across the Nine Worlds whenever you passed through a forest, or tread on living grass or moss.”

“Moss?” I said.

“Yes, my dear. There is even a moss called Sif’s hair, named after my luxurious golden locks.”

She looked smug, though I wasn’t sure I would be so excited about having a moss named after me.

Hearth pointed at the trees around the courtyard and signed, *r-o-w-a-n*.

Sif brightened. “You know much, Hearthstone! The rowan is indeed my sacred tree. I can pass from one to another across the Nine Worlds, which is how I brought you to my palace. The rowan is the source of so many blessings. Did you know my son Uller made the first bow and the first skis from rowan wood? I was so proud.”

“Oh, yeah.” I recalled a conversation I’d once had with a goat in Jotunheim. (It’s depressing I can even use that sentence.) “Otis mentioned something about Uller. I didn’t know he was Thor’s son.”

Sif put a finger to her lips. “Actually, Uller is my son by my *first* husband. Thor’s a little sensitive about that.” This fact seemed to please her. “But speaking of rowan trees, I have a gift for our elfish sorcerer!”

From the sleeves of her elegant dress, she brought out a leather pouch.

Hearth almost fell over. He made some wild hand gestures that didn’t really mean anything, but seemed to convey the idea *GASP!*

Blitzen grabbed his arm to steady him. “Is—is that a bag of runes, milady?”

Sif smiled. “That’s correct, my well-dressed dwarven friend. Runes written on wood carry a very different power than runes written on stone. They are full of life, full of suppleness. Their magic is softer and more malleable. And rowan is the best wood for runes.”

She beckoned Hearth forward. She pressed the leather pouch into his trembling hands.

“You will need these in the struggle to come,” she told him. “But be warned—one rune is missing, just as with your other set. When any letter is absent, the entire language of magic is weakened. Someday you will have to reclaim that symbol to reach your full potential. When you do, come see me again.”

I remembered the *inheritance* rune Hearthstone had left behind on his brother’s cairn. If Sif could jump through trees and telepathically communicate with moss, I didn’t understand why she couldn’t just hand Hearthstone a new othala. Then again, I wasn’t a graduate of Rune Magic with the All-Father: A Weekend Seminar.

Hearthstone bowed his head in gratitude. He stepped away from the dais, cradling his new pouch o’ power like it was a swaddled baby.

Sam shifted, gripping her ax. She eyed Sif as if the goddess might be Little Billy in disguise. “Lady Sif, that’s very kind. But you were going to tell us why you brought us here?”

“To help my husband!” Sif said. “I assume you now have the information necessary to find and retrieve his hammer?”

I glanced at my friends, wondering if anyone had a diplomatic way of saying *sort of, kind of, not really*.

Sif sighed with the slightest hint of disdain. “Oh, yes, I see. First you want to discuss the matter of payment.”

“Um,” I said, “that wasn’t really—”

“Just a moment.” Sif ran her fingers through her long hair like she was working a loom. Red-yellow strands fell into her lap and began weaving themselves into some sort of shape, like a 3-D printer spitting out solid gold.

I turned to Sam and whispered, “Is she like Rapunzel?”

Sam arched her eyebrow. “Where do you think that fairy tale came from?”

In moments, with no visible loss of integrity to Sif’s hairdo, the goddess was holding a small golden trophy. She held it up proudly. “You’ll each get one of these!”

At the top of the trophy was a tiny golden replica of the hammer Mjolnir. On the pedestal at the bottom was engraved: AWARD OF VALOR FOR RETRIEVING THOR'S HAMMER. And in smaller letters I had to squint to read: BEARER IS ENTITLED TO ONE FREE ENTRÉE WITH PURCHASE OF AN ENTRÉE OF EQUAL VALUE AT PARTICIPATING ASGARD RESTAURANTS.

Blitzen made a squeak sound. "That's amazing! Such workmanship! How...?"

Sif smiled, obviously pleased. "Well, since my original hair was replaced with solid-gold magical hair after that *horrible* trick Loki played on me"—her smile soured as she glanced at Alex and Sam—"one benefit is that I can weave my extra hair into any number of solid-gold items. I am responsible for paying the house staff, including heroes such as yourselves, with tokens like this. Thor is so sweet. He appreciates my abilities so much he calls me his trophy wife."

I blinked. "Wow."

"I know!" Sif actually blushed. "At any rate, when your job is done, you'll each get a trophy."

Blitzen reached longingly for the sample. "A free entrée at—at any participating restaurant?" I was afraid he might weep for joy.

"Yes, dear," said the goddess. "Now, how do you plan to retrieve the hammer?"

Alex coughed. "Um, actually—"

"Never mind, don't tell me!" Sif raised her hand like she wanted to block out Alex's face. "I prefer to leave details to the help."

"The *help*," Alex said.

"Yes. Now, your first task will be tricky. Whatever news you have, you will need to deliver it to my husband. The elevator is just there. You'll find him in his—what does he call it?—his *man cave*. Just be warned, he has been in a very *bad* mood."

Sam drummed her fingers on the head of her ax. "I don't suppose you could just give him a message for us?"

Sif's smile hardened. "Why, no, I couldn't. Now run along. And try not to send Thor into a murderous rage. I don't have time to hire another group of heroes."



## FORTY-FIVE

### Pigtails Have Never Looked So Frightening

“SIF SUCKS,” Alex muttered as soon as the elevator doors closed.

“Maybe this isn’t the time to say that,” I suggested, “when we’re in her elevator.”

“If the legends are true,” Blitz added, “this mansion has over six hundred floors. I’d rather not fall all the way to the basement.”

“Whatever,” Alex grumbled. “Also, what kind of name is Bright Crack?”

A two-second chorus of heavenly bliss sounded from the overhead speakers.

“It’s a kenning!” Blitzen said. “You know, like Blood River for the Skofnung Sword guy. Bright Crack—”

*Ahhhhhhh!*

“—is just a poetic way of saying *lightning*, since Thor’s the thunder god and all.”

“Hmpf,” said Alex. “There is *nothing* poetic about Bright Crack.”

*Ahhhhhhh!*

Since getting his new rune bag, Hearthstone had been even more withdrawn than usual. He leaned in the corner of the elevator, tugging at the string on the leather pouch. I tried to get his attention, to ask if he was okay, but he wouldn’t meet my eyes.

As for Sam, she kept running her fingertips down the edge of her ax as if she anticipated using it soon.

“You don’t like Sif, either,” I noted.

Sam shrugged. “Why should I? She’s a vain goddess. I don’t often agree with my father’s pranks, but cutting off Sif’s original golden hair—that I understood. He was making a point. She cares about her appearance above everything else. The ability to weave things with her new precious-metal hair, the whole thing about her being a trophy wife? I’m sure my dad planned that, too. It’s his idea of a joke. Sif and Thor are just too dense to pick up on it.”

Hearthstone apparently caught that. He stuffed the rune bag into his pocket and signed, *Sif is wise and good. Goddess of growing things. You—* He pointed at Sam, then made two okay signs with his hands, flicking one across the other as if tearing a piece of paper—the sign for *unfair*.

“Hey, elf?” Alex said. “I’m guessing at your meaning, but if you’re defending Sif, I gotta say I’m with Samirah on this one.”

“Thank you,” said Sam.

Hearthstone scowled and crossed his arms, the deaf equivalent of *I can’t even talk to you right now*.

Blitz grunted. “Well, I think you’re nuts to be bad-mouthing Thor’s wife in Thor’s own house when we’re about to see—”

*Ding.*

The elevator doors slid open.

“Holy man cave,” I said.

We stepped out of the elevator into a sort of garage area. Suspended on a hydraulic lift was Thor’s chariot, the wheels off and what looked like a broken transaxle hanging from the undercarriage. Lining a Peg-Board against one wall were dozens of wrenches, saws, screwdrivers, and rubber mallets. I briefly considered picking up one of the mallets and yelling, *I found your hammer!* But I thought the joke might not go over well.

Past the garage area, the basement opened up into a full-fledged man cavern. Stalactites hung from the ceiling high above, filling the room with a Nidavellir-like glow. The back half of the cave was an IMAX theater with two full-size screens and a line of smaller plasma monitors across the bottom, so Thor could watch two feature films while keeping track of a dozen different sporting events. Because, you know, relaxing. The theater chairs were leather-and-fur recliners fitted with drink tables fashioned from moose antlers.

To our left was a galley kitchen: five stainless steel Sub-Zero refrigerators, an oven, three microwaves, a row of high-end blenders, and a

butchering station that was probably *not* his goats' favorite place. At the end of a short hallway, a stuffed ram's head pointed the way to the restrooms with a placard hanging from either horn:

VALKYRIES →  
← BERSERKERS

The right half of the cavern was mostly arcade games—pretty much the last thing I wanted to see after Utgard Lanes. Fortunately, there was no bowling alley. Judging from the oversize table that took place of honor in the middle of the cave, Thor was more of an air-hockey man.

The place was so huge I didn't even see Thor until he marched out from behind the *Dance Dance Revolution* machine. He looked lost in thought, pacing and muttering while knocking two air-hockey paddles together, as if preparing to defibrillate someone's heart. Behind him trailed his goats, Otis and Marvin, but they weren't very nimble on their hooves. Every time Thor turned, he collided with them and had to shove them out of the way.

"Hammers," he was grumbling. "Stupid, stupid hammers. Hammers."

Finally, he noticed us. "Aha!"

He stormed over, his eyes bloodshot and furious, his face as red as his bushy beard. His battle armor consisted of a ragged Metallica T-shirt and gym shorts that showed off his pale hairy legs. His bare feet were in dire need of a gentlemen's pedicure. For some reason, his scraggly scarlet hair was in pigtails, but on Thor the look was more terrifying than funny. It was almost as if he wanted us to know *I can wear my hair like a six-year-old girl and still murder you!*

"What news?" he demanded.

"Hey, Thor," I said, in a voice about as manly as his pigtails. "Uh, Sumarbrander has something to tell you."

I pulled off my pendant and summoned Jack. Was it cowardly of me to hide behind a magical talking sword? I prefer to think of it as strategically wise. I wouldn't be able to do Thor any favors if he smashed my face in with an air-hockey paddle.

"Hi, Thor!" Jack glowed cheerfully. "Hi, goats! Ooh, air hockey! Sweet chill pad, Thunder Man!"

Thor scratched his beard with a paddle. The name of his son Modi was tattooed in blue across his knuckles. I really hoped I didn't get a closer look at that name.

“Yes, yes, hello, Sumarbrander,” Thor grumbled. “But where is my hammer? Where is Mjolnir?”

“Oh.” Jack glowed a darker shade of orange. He wasn’t able to glare, but he definitely turned a sharp edge in my direction. “So...good news on that front. We know who has the hammer, and we know where he is keeping it.”

“Excellent!”

Jack hovered back a few inches. “But there is some bad news...”

Otis sighed to his brother Marvin. “I have a feeling we’re about to be killed.”

“Stop that!” Marvin snapped. “Don’t give the boss ideas!”

“The hammer was stolen by a giant named Thrym,” Jack continued. “He’s buried it eight miles under the earth.”

“Not excellent!” Thor smashed his air-hockey paddles together. Thunder rolled through the room. Plasma-screen TVs toppled. Microwaves flickered. The goats stumbled back and forth like they were on the deck of a ship.

“I hate Thrym!” the god roared. “I hate earth giants!”

“So do we!” Jack agreed. “And here’s Magnus to tell you about our brilliant plan to get the hammer back!”

Jack flew behind me and hovered there with great strategic wisdom. Otis and Marvin backed away from their master and hid behind the *Dance Dance Revolution* machine.

At least Alex, Sam, Blitz, and Hearth didn’t hide, but Alex gave me a look like, *Hey, he’s your thunder god.*

So I told Thor the whole story: how we’d been tricked into going to the wight’s tomb for the Skofnung Sword, then we’d rushed to Alfheim for the Skofnung Stone, we’d climbed the Bifrost for a selfie with Heimdall, and we’d gone bowling for information with Utgard-Loki. I explained about Thrym’s demands for a marriage alliance with Loki.

Every so often I had to pause so Thor could process the news by storming around, throwing power tools, and punching the walls.

He needed a lot of processing time.

When I was done, Thor announced his well-reasoned conclusion. “We must kill them all!”

Blitz raised his hand. “Ah, Mr. Thor, even if we could get you close enough to Thrym, killing him wouldn’t help. He’s the only one who knows exactly where the hammer is.”

“So we torture him for the information and *then* kill him! Then I will retrieve the hammer myself!”

Alex muttered, “Nice guy.”

“Sir,” Sam said, “even if we did that—and torture isn’t very effective, or, you know, ethical—even if Thrym told you exactly where the hammer was, how would you get it back from eight miles under the earth?”

“I would break through the earth! With my hammer!”

We waited for Thor’s mental gears to turn.

“Oh,” said the god. “I see the problem. Curses! Follow me!”

He marched into the garage, tossed aside his hockey paddles, and started rummaging through his tools. “There must be something in here that can drill through eight miles of solid rock.”

He considered a hand drill, a tape measure, a corkscrew, and the iron staff we’d almost died retrieving from Geirrod’s fortress. He threw them all to the floor.

“Nothing!” he said in disgust. “Useless junk!”

*Perhaps you could use your head,* Hearthstone signed. *That is very hard.*

“Oh, don’t try to console me, Mr. Elf,” said Thor. “It’s hopeless, isn’t it? You have to *have* hammers to *get* hammers. And this...” He picked up a rubber mallet and sighed. “This won’t do. I’m ruined! All the giants will soon know I’m defenseless. They’ll invade Midgard, destroy the television industry, and I will *never* be able to watch my shows again!”

“There might be a way to get the hammer.” The words came out of my mouth before I considered what I was saying.

Thor’s eyes lit up. “You have a large bomb?”

“Uh, no. But Thrym is expecting to marry someone tomorrow, right? We can pretend to go along with it and—”

“Forget it,” Thor growled. “I know what you’re going to suggest. There’s no way! Thrym’s grandfather humiliated me enough when *he* stole my hammer. I will not do *that* again!”

“Do what?” I asked.

“Wear a wedding dress!” Thor said. “Pretend to be the giant’s bride, Freya, who refused to marry Thrym. Selfish woman! I was disgraced, humiliated, and—What are *you* smirking about?”

This last comment was directed at Alex, who quickly put on her serious face.

“Nothing,” she said. “Just...you in a wedding dress.”

Hovering behind my shoulder, Jack whispered, “He looked a-MAZ-ing.”

Thor grunted. “It was all Loki’s idea, of course. It worked. I infiltrated the wedding, got my hammer back, and killed the giants—well, except for those little kids, Thrym the Third and Thrynga. But when I got back to Asgard, Loki told the story so many times he made me a laughingstock. No one took me seriously for *ages!*” Thor frowned as if he’d just had a thought, which must have been a painful experience. “You know, I bet that was Loki’s plan all along. I bet he arranged the theft *and* the solution to make me look bad!”

“That’s terrible,” Alex said. “What was your bridal dress like?”

“Oh, it was white with a high lace appliquéd neckline and these lovely scalloped—” Thor’s beard sparked with electricity. “THAT’S NOT IMPORTANT!”

“Anyway...” I stepped in. “This Thrym—Thrym the Third or whatever—he’s expecting you to try that trick again. He’s got some kind of security precautions in place. No gods are getting through the front door unnoticed. We’ll need a different bride.”

“Well, that’s a relief!” He grinned at Samirah. “And I do thank you for stepping up, girl! I’m glad you’re not as selfish as Freya. I owe you a gift. I’ll have Sif make you a trophy. Or perhaps you’d like a Hot Pocket? I have some in the freezer—”

“No, Lord Thor,” Sam said. “I’m not marrying a giant for you.”

Thor winked slyly. “Right....You’re only pretending to marry him. Then once he brings out the hammer—”

“I’m not even pretending,” Sam said.

“*I am,*” Alex said.



## FORTY-SIX

### Here Comes the Bride and/or the Assassin

ALEX KNEW how to get our attention. Hearth and Blitz gawped at her. Jack gasped and glowed bright yellow. Thor's eyebrows furrowed, sparking like jumper cables. Even the goats trotted over to get a closer look at the crazy girl.

"What?" Alex demanded. "Sam and I discussed it. She vowed to Amir that she wouldn't even *fake*-marry this giant, right? The charade doesn't bother me at all. I'll dress up, say the vows, kill my new husband, whatever. Sam and I are close to the same size. We're both children of Loki. She can pose as my maid of honor. It's our best option."

I stared at Sam. "That's what you and Alex have been talking about?"

Samirah fingered the keys on her belt ring. "Alex thinks she can resist Loki...unlike what happened to me in Provincetown."

It was the first time she'd talked about the incident so openly. I remembered Loki snapping his fingers, Sam collapsing in a heap, all the air expelled from her lungs. Sam was a Valkyrie. She had the strongest willpower and discipline of anyone I knew. If *she* couldn't resist Loki's control...

"Alex, are you sure?" I tried not to let doubt creep into my voice. "I mean, have you ever tried to resist Loki before?"

Alex's expression hardened. "What is *that* supposed to mean?"

"No," I said hastily. "I just—"

“The larger point,” Thor butted in, “is that you’re not even a proper girl! You’re an argr!”

The air became still, like the moment before a thunderclap. I wasn’t sure which possibility scared me more, Thor attacking Alex, or Alex attacking Thor. The look in her eyes made me wonder if we shouldn’t just put her on the borders of Jotunheim to scare away the giants rather than bothering with Thor and his hammer.

“I’m a child of Loki,” she said in an even tone. “That’s what Thrym is expecting. Like my parent, I’m gender fluid. And when I’m female, I *am* female. I can definitely pull off a lace appliquéd wedding gown better than you!”

Thor fumed. “Well, there’s no need to be mean about it.”

“Besides,” Alex said, “I will *not* let Loki control me. I never have. I never will. I also don’t see anyone *else* volunteering for this suicidal bridal mission.”

“*Suicidal bridal,*” Jack said. “Hey, that rhymes!”

Otis clopped forward and sighed. “Well, if you need a volunteer to die, I suppose I can do it. I’ve always loved weddings—”

“Shut up, dummy!” Marvin said. “You’re a goat!”

Thor picked up his iron staff. He leaned against it thoughtfully, tapping his fingers and making different images flicker across the surface—a soccer match, the Home Shopping Network, *Gilligan’s Island*.

“Well,” he said at last, “I still don’t trust an argr to do this job—”

“A *gender-fluid* person,” Alex corrected.

“A gender...whatever you said,” Thor amended. “But I suppose, respectfully, you have the least to lose.”

Alex bared her teeth. “I get now why Loki loves you so much.”

“Guys,” I said. “We have other problems to discuss, and not much time. Thrym is expecting his bride to arrive tomorrow.”

Alex folded her arms. “It’s decided, then. I get to marry the big ugly guy.”

*Yes, you marry him*, Hearthstone signed. *Many happy years and fine children.*

Alex narrowed her eyes. “I can see I’m going to have to learn sign language. In the meantime, I will assume you said, *Yes, Alex. Thank you, Alex, for being so brave and heroic.*”

*Close enough*, Hearth signed.

I still wasn't loving the idea of Alex as a decoy bride, but I figured I'd better move things along. Keeping this group focused was like driving a chariot with no goats and a broken transaxle.

"So anyway," I said, "we have to assume we can't sneak Thor in with the wedding party."

"And he can't simply bust into an earth giant's lair," Blitz added.

Thor harrumphed. "I've tried, believe me. The stupid giants are buried too deep in rock too dense."

"You're an expert on density," Alex guessed.

I gave her a *shut up* look. "So we have to use the front door. I'm guessing they won't tell us where that is until the last minute to avoid an ambush or unwelcome tagalongs."

"What does the invitation say?" Sam asked.

I took it out and showed them. The time slot now read: TOMORROW MORNING!!! The location slot still said: WE'LL GET BACK TO YOU.

"That's okay," I said. "I think I may know where the entrance will appear."

I explained to Thor about the photo of Bridal Veil Falls.

The thunder god did not look overjoyed. "So either you're wrong and this is a random photograph, or you're right and you're choosing to believe information from your treacherous uncle?"

"Well...yeah. But if it is the entrance—"

"I could scout it out," Thor said. "I could have a team of gods in place, undercover, ready to follow the wedding party inside all stealthy-like."

"A team of gods sounds excellent," I agreed.

"Depending on the gods," Blitz murmured.

"We also have some einherjar standing by," Sam suggested. "Good warriors. Trustworthy."

She said *trustworthy* like it was a word Thor might not have heard before.

"Hmm." Thor twirled one of his pigtails. "I suppose this could work. And once Thrym summons the hammer—"

"If he summons it," Alex said. "He's using it as the, er, *morning after* gift."

Thor looked aghast. "Regardless, he *must* summon it for the ceremony! The bride has the right to insist. The symbol of my hammer is always used to

bless a wedding. If Thrym has the real thing, he *must* use it if you request it. And once he does, we'll move in and kill everyone!"

*Except us,* Hearthstone said.

"Exactly, Mr. Elf! It will be a glorious bloodbath!"

"Lord Thor," Sam said, "how will you know when the time is right to charge in?"

"That's easy." He turned and patted Marvin's and Otis's heads. "You'll ride my chariot into the wedding hall. That's a common enough practice for lords and ladies. With a little concentration, I can see and hear what my goats see and hear."

"Yes," Otis said. "It gives me a tingling feeling right behind my eyeballs."

"Be quiet," Marvin said. "Nobody wants to hear about your tingling eyeballs."

"When the hammer appears"—Thor grinned evilly—"we move in, gods and einherjar. We slaughter the giants, and all will be well. I feel better already!"

"Yay!" Jack cheered, clinking against Thor's staff in a high five...or a high just-one.

Samirah raised her index finger like, *one moment*. "There's something else. Loki wants the Skofnung Sword so he can cut himself free. How do we make sure he doesn't get it?"

"That will never happen!" Thor said. "Loki's place of punishment is in a completely different location, sealed long ago by the gods. Loki is bound even better than Fenris Wolf."

*And we saw how well that worked out,* Hearth signed.

"The elf speaks wisely," Thor agreed. "There is nothing to worry about. Loki can't be at the wedding in the flesh. Even if Thrym gets hold of the Skofnung Sword, he won't have time to find Loki or free him—not before we swoop in and kill the big oaf!"

Thor swung his iron staff to demonstrate his ninja moves. His left pigtail came loose in the process, which only added to the intimidating effect.

A cold feeling spread through my gut. "I don't know about this plan. It still feels like we're missing something important."

"My hammer!" Thor said. "But we'll get that back soon enough. Mr. Elf and Mr. Dwarf, why don't you go to Valhalla and alert the einherjar?"

“Sir, we would...” Blitz adjusted his pith helmet. “But we’re not technically allowed in Valhalla, not being, you know, dead.”

“I can fix that!”

“Don’t kill us!” Blitz yelped.

Thor just rummaged around his worktable until he found a two-by-four with a key attached to one end. Burned into the side of the plank were the words THOR’S HALL PASS.

“This will get you into Valhalla,” he promised. “Just return it. I’m going to fix this chariot so our gender argr bride can use it tomorrow. Then I’ll gather my assault squad and scout out this location, Bridal Veil Falls.”

“And the rest of us?” I asked reluctantly.

“You and the two children of Loki will be our guests tonight!” Thor announced. “Go see Sif upstairs, and she will get you settled. In the morning, you will ride forth to a glorious matrimonial massacre!”

“Oh,” Otis said with a sigh. “I do love weddings.”



## FORTY-SEVEN

### I Prepare for Funkytown Combat

THE NIGHT before a big massacre, you might think I would toss and turn.

Nope. I slept like a rock giant.

Sif gave each of us a guest room in the upper levels of Bright Crack. I collapsed on my rowan-wood bed with its sheets of woven gold and didn't stir until the next morning when I heard the alarm clock—a small gold Mjolnir trophy that wouldn't stop singing a divine chorus of *Ahhhhhhh!* *Ahhhhhhh!* *Ahhhhhhh!* until I grabbed it off the nightstand and threw it against the wall. I have to admit, that was a satisfying way to wake up.

I don't think Sam and Alex slept quite as well. When I met them in Sif's atrium, they both looked bleary-eyed. In Alex's lap was a plate of what used to be doughnuts. She had broken them into pieces to make a frowny face. Her fingers were caked in powdered sugar.

Sam held a cup of coffee to her lips as if she liked the smell but couldn't remember how to drink. The Skofnung Sword was slung across her back.

She looked up at me and asked, "Where?"

At first, I didn't understand the question. Then I realized she was asking if I knew where we were going today.

I fumbled through my pockets for the wedding invitation.

The *when* space now read: TODAY! AT 10 A.M. ARE YOU EXCITED?!?

The *where* space read: PROCEED TO THE TACO BELL ON I-93 SOUTH OF MANCHESTER, NH. AWAIT FURTHER INSTRUCTIONS. NO AESIR, OR THE HAMMER GETS IT!

I showed this to Alex and Sam.

“Taco Bell?” Alex grumbled. “Those monsters.”

“Something’s not right.” Sam took a sip of coffee. The cup trembled in her hands. “Magnus, all night I was thinking about what you said. We are missing something important, and I don’t mean the hammer.”

“Perhaps,” said the voice of our hostess, “you’re missing the appropriate clothes.”

Before us stood Sif, having appeared out nowhere, as goddesses tend to do. She wore the same red-orange dress, the same green-and-silver brooch, and the same pained smile that said, *I think you’re my house servants, but I don’t remember your names.*

“My husband tells me you want to play dress-up.” She gave Alex an up-and-down look. “I suppose it will be easier than putting Thor in a wedding dress, but we have a lot of work to do. Come along.”

She strolled toward a hallway at the back of the atrium, crooking a finger over her shoulder for Alex to follow.

“If I’m not back in an hour,” Alex said, “it means I have strangled Sif and am hiding the body.”

Her expression gave absolutely no indication she was kidding. She sashayed off, doing such a good imitation of Sif’s walk that I would’ve given her a trophy.

Sam rose. Coffee cup in hand, she walked to the nearest window. She stared across the rooftops of Asgard. Her eyes seemed to fix on the shield-thatched golden dome of Valhalla.

“Alex isn’t ready,” she said.

I joined her at the window. A wisp of dark hair had escaped the edge of her hijab by her left temple. I had a protective urge to tuck it back in. Since I valued my hand, I didn’t.

“Do you think she’s right?” I asked. “Can she...you know, resist your dad?”

“She *thinks* she’s right,” Sam said. “She has some theory about claiming her own powers, not letting Loki possess her. She even volunteered to teach me. But I don’t think she’s ever tested herself against our father. Not really.”

I thought about my conversation with Alex in the woods of Jotunheim, how confidently she had talked about using the image of the Urnes snakes for herself, stepping out of her parent’s poisonous shadow. It was a nice idea.

Unfortunately, I'd seen how easily Loki could manipulate people. I'd seen what he'd done to my Uncle Randolph.

"At least we won't be alone." I gazed at Valhalla in the distance. For the first time, I felt a twinge of homesickness for the place. I hoped Blitz and Hearth had gotten there safely. I imagined them with the gang from floor nineteen, preparing their weapons and suiting up in wedding attire for a daring raid that would save our butts.

As for Thor...I didn't have much faith in him. But with luck he and a bunch of other Aesir would be dug in around Bridal Veil Falls, dressed in camouflage with high-powered hand catapults or rocket spears or whatever other weapons god commandos were wielding these days.

Sam shook her head. "Help or no...Alex doesn't know what it was like in that wight's tomb. She's not fully aware of what Loki is capable of, how easily he can just..." She snapped her fingers.

I wasn't sure what to say. *It's okay, you couldn't help it* didn't seem useful.

Sam sipped her coffee. "I should be the one in the wedding dress. I'm a Valkyrie. I have powers Alex doesn't have. I have more experience fighting. I—"

"You made a promise to Amir. You have lines you can't cross. That's not a weakness. It's one of your strengths."

She studied my face, maybe judging how serious I was. "Sometimes it doesn't feel like a strength."

"After what happened in that tomb in Provincetown?" I said. "Knowing what Loki can do and not knowing whether you can resist him, you're *still* going right back in to fight him. You ask me, that's way above Valhalla-level courage."

She set down her cup on the windowsill. "Thanks, Magnus. But today, if you have to choose...If Loki tries to use Alex and me as hostages, or—"

"Sam, no."

"Whatever he is planning, Magnus, you *have* to stop him. If we're incapacitated, you may be the only one who can." She shrugged off the Skofnung Sword and handed it to me. "Keep this. Don't let it out of your sight."

Even in the morning light of Asgard, in the warmth of Sif's atrium, the sword's leather sheath felt as cold as a freezer door. The Skofnung Stone was

now strapped to the pommel. When I slung the sword across my back, the stone dug against my shoulder blade.

“Sam, it won’t come down to a choice. I’m not letting Loki kill my friends. I’m definitely not letting him near this sword. Unless he wants to eat the blade. I’m fine with that.”

The corner of Sam’s mouth twitched. “I’m glad you’ll be at my side for this, Magnus. I hope someday, when I have my *actual* wedding, you’ll be there, too.”

That was the nicest thing anybody had said to me in a while. Of course, given how messed up my last few days had been, maybe that wasn’t a surprise. “I will be there,” I promised. “And it won’t just be for the awesome catering from Fadlan’s Falafel.”

She swatted my shoulder, which I took as a compliment. Usually she avoided any sort of physical contact. I guess whacking a stupid friend occasionally was permissible.

For a while, we watched the sun rise over Asgard. We were a long way up, but as with the time I’d seen Asgard from Valhalla, I spotted no one stirring in the streets. I wondered about all the dark windows and silent courtyards, the untended gardens left to grow wild. Which gods had lived in those mansions? Where had they all gone? Maybe they’d gotten tired of the lax security and moved to a gated community where the guardian didn’t spend all his time taking celestial selfies.

I’m not sure how long we waited for Alex. Long enough for me to drink some coffee and eat a frowny face of broken doughnuts. Long enough for me to wonder why Alex was taking so long hiding Sif’s body.

Finally, the goddess and the bride-to-be emerged from the hall. All the moisture evaporated from my mouth. Electricity jumped from pore to pore across my scalp.

Alex’s white silk gown glowed with gold embroidery, from the tassels on her sleeves to the serpentine curls along the hem that swept her feet. A necklace of golden arcs curved at the base of her neck like an inverted rainbow. Pinned to her black-and-green ringlets was a white veil, pushed back to show her face: her two-toned eyes lined with delicate mascara, her lips colored a warm shade of red.

“Sister,” Sam said. “You look amazing.”

I was glad *she* said it. My tongue was curled up like a titanium sleeping bag.

Alex scowled at me. “Magnus, could you please stop staring at me as if I’m going to murder you?”

“I wasn’t—”

“Because if you don’t, I *will* murder you.”

“Right.” It was difficult to look elsewhere, but I tried.

Sif had a smug glint in her eyes. “Judging from the reaction of our male test subject, I think my work here is done. Except for one thing...” From around her own waist, the goddess pulled a long strand of gold so thin and delicate I could hardly see it. On each end was a golden handle in the shape of an S. A garrote, I realized, like Alex’s, except in gold. Sif fastened it around Alex’s waist, buckling the S’s together so they formed the Urnes snakes.

“There,” Sif said. “This weapon, fashioned from my own hair, has the same properties as your other garrote, except that it goes with your outfit, and it is *not* from Loki. May it serve you well, Alex Fierro.”

Alex looked like she’d been offered a trophy entitling the bearer to pretty much everything. “I—I don’t know how to thank you, Sif.”

The goddess inclined her head. “Perhaps we can both try harder not to judge based on first impressions, eh?”

“That...yeah. Agreed.”

“And if you get a chance,” Sif added, “strangling your father with a garrote made from my magical hair would seem quite appropriate.”

Alex curtseyed.

The goddess turned to Sam. “Now, my dear, let us see what we can do for the maid of honor.”

After Sif had escorted Samirah down the Hall of Magical Makeovers, I turned to Alex, trying my best not to gawk.

“I, um...” My tongue started to roll up again. “What did you say to Sif? She seems to like you now.”

“I can be very charming,” Alex said. “And don’t worry. It’ll be your turn soon.”

“To...be charming?”

“That would be impossible.” Alex wrinkled her nose in a very Sif-like way. “But at least you can get cleaned up. I need my chaperone to look *much* spiffier.”

I’m not sure I managed spiffy. More like iffy.

While Samirah was still getting dressed, Sif came back and guided me to the gentlemen's fitting room. Why the goddess even had a gentlemen's fitting room, I wasn't sure, but I guessed Thor didn't spend a lot of time there. It was completely devoid of gym shorts and Metallica T-shirts.

Sif outfitted me with a gold-and-white tuxedo, the inside lining made from chain mail à la Blitzen. Jack hovered nearby, humming with excitement. He especially liked the woven gold Sif-hair bow tie and the frilly shirt.

"Aw, yeah!" he exclaimed. "All you need now is the right runestone on this studly outfit!"

I'd never seen him so eager to turn into a silent pendant. The rune of Frey took its place just below my bow tie, nestled in the frills like a stone Easter egg. With the Skofnung Sword strapped to my back, I looked like I was ready to boogie down while stabbing my closest relatives. Sadly, that was probably accurate.

As soon as I got back to the atrium, Alex doubled over with laughter. There was something deeply humiliating about being laughed at by a girl in a wedding dress, especially a girl who was *rocking* that wedding dress.

"Oh my gods." She snorted. "You look like you're on your way to a Vegas wedding in 1987."

"In your own words," I said, "shut up."

She walked over and straightened my tie. Her eyes danced with amusement. She smelled like woodsmoke. Why did she still smell like a campfire?

She backed away and snorted again. "Yep. All better. Now we just need Sam—Oh, wow."

I followed her gaze.

Samirah had emerged from the hallway. She wore a green formal dress with black embroidery that was the mirror image of Alex's—serpentine swirls from the sleeves all the way down to the hem. In place of her usual hijab, she wore a green silk hood with a bandit sort of veil across the bridge of her nose. Only her eyes were visible, and even those were deep in shadow.

"You look great," I told her. "Also, I loved you in *Assassin's Creed*."

"Ha, ha," Sam said. "I see you're ready for the prom. Alex, have you tried your veil yet?"

With Sam's help, Alex drew the curtain of white gauze over her face. There was something ghostly about her in that veil, like she might start floating away at any moment. You could see that she *had* a face, but her features were completely obscured. If I didn't know better, I might have thought she was Sam. Only her hands gave her away. Alex's skin tone was a few shades lighter than Sam's. She fixed this by pulling on lace gloves. I really wished Blitzen were with us, because he would've loved all the fancy outfits.

"My heroes." Sif stood next to one of her rowan trees. "It is time."

The trunk of the tree split open, revealing a rift of purple light the exact color of a Taco Bell sign.

"Where's the chariot?" Alex asked.

"Waiting for you on the other side," Sif said. "Go forth, my friends, and kill many giants."

*Friends, I noted. Not hired help.*

Maybe we'd really made an impression on the goddess. Or maybe she figured we were about to die, so a little kindness wouldn't hurt.

Alex turned to me. "You first, Magnus. If there are any hostiles, your tux will blind them."

Sam laughed.

Mostly to get the embarrassment over with, I walked through the rowan tree into a different world.



## FORTY-EIGHT

### All Aboard the Cheesy Gordita Express

THE ONLY THING hostile in the Taco Bell parking lot was Marvin, who was giving his brother, Otis, a thorough scolding.

“Thanks a lot for getting us turned into Hot Pockets, you idiot!” Marvin shouted. “You know how badly you have to annoy Thor before he eats us in that form?”

“Oh, look.” Otis pointed his horns in our direction. “It’s our passengers.”

He said the word *passengers* like *executioners*. I guess for Otis those two words were often synonyms.

Both goats were harnessed to their chariot, which was parallel parked next to the restaurant’s drive-through lane. Their collars were decked with golden bells that jingled cheerfully when Otis and Marvin shook their heads. The chariot box itself was garlanded in yellow-and-white flowers that didn’t quite mask the lingering smell of sweaty thunder god.

“Hey, guys.” I told the goats, “You look festive.”

“Yeah,” Marvin grumbled. “I feel *real* festive. You know where we’re going yet, human? The smell of Grande Scrambler Burritos is making me sick.”

I checked the invitation. The *where* line now said: PROCEED TO BRIDAL VEIL FALLS. YOU ONLY HAVE FIVE MINUTES.

I read it twice just to make sure I wasn’t imagining it. I’d guessed correctly. Uncle Randolph really might have been trying to help me. Now we had a chance at smuggling in some godly wedding crashers.

On the other hand, there was no avoiding the wedding now. I'd won a lottery in which the grand prize was a one-way trip into an evil earth giant's lair of pickle jars, beer bottles, and death. I doubted he would even honor Sif's coupon trophies.

I showed the invitation to the goats and the girls.

"So you were right," Sam said. "Maybe Thor—"

"Shh," warned Alex. "From this point on, I think we should assume Loki is watching and listening."

That was another cheerful thought. The goats looked around as if Loki might be hiding nearby, possibly disguised as a grande burrito.

"Yeah," Marvin said, a little too loudly, "maybe Thor...would be sad, because there's no way he could make it to Bridal Veil Falls with an assault team in only five minutes, since we just got this information now and are at a huge disadvantage. Bummer!"

His subterfuge skills were almost as refined as Otis's. I wondered if the two goats had matching trench coats, hats, and sunglasses.

Otis gave his bells a jolly jingle. "We'd better hurry along to our deaths. Five minutes isn't much time, even for Thor's chariot. Hop aboard."

Hopping wasn't possible for Sam and Alex in their wedding dresses. I had to pull them up, which neither of them enjoyed, judging from the muttering and cursing behind their veils.

The goats took off at a full gallop...or whatever it is goats do. Canter? Trot? Strut? At the edge of the parking lot, the chariot went airborne. We jingled as we flew from the restaurant like Taco Claus's sleigh, bringing Cheesy Gordita Crunches to all the good little boys and girls and giants.

The goats picked up speed. We cut through a cloud bank at a thousand miles per hour, the cold mist slicking back my hair and wilting my shirt frills. I wished I had a veil like Sam and Alex, or at least some goggles. I wondered if Jack could make like a windshield wiper.

Then, just as quickly, we began to descend. Below us spread the White Mountains—rolling gray ridges with veins of white where the snow clung to life in the crevices.

Otis and Marvin dive-bombed one of the valleys, leaving my internal organs up in the clouds. Stanley the horse would have approved. Sam did not. She clutched the railing and muttered, "Minimums, guys. Watch your approach speed."

Alex snickered. "Don't be a backseat pilot."

We landed in a forested ravine. The goats trotted onward, snow churning around the chariot wheels like thickening ice cream. Otis and Marvin didn't seem to mind. They forged ahead, jingling and exhaling steam, pulling us deeper into the shadow of the mountains.

I kept watching the ridges above us, hoping to spot some Aesir and einherjar hidden in the brush, ready to help should something go wrong. I would have loved to see the glint of T.J.'s bayonet or Halfborn's painted berserker face, or hear a bit of Gaelic cursing from Mallory. But the woods seemed empty.

I remembered what Utgard-Loki had said—that killing us and taking the Skofnung Sword would be much easier than letting us go through with the wedding plans.

"Hey, guys...how do we know Thrym isn't a fan of, uh, option one?"

"He wouldn't kill us," Sam said. "Not unless he has to. He *wants* this marriage alliance with Loki, which means he needs me—I mean her, Samirah." She pointed to Alex.

Marvin tossed his horns as if trying to dislodge his bells. "You guys worried about an ambush? Don't be. Wedding parties are guaranteed safe passage."

"True," Otis said. "Though the giants could always kill us after the ceremony, I hope."

"You mean you *guess*," Marvin said. "Not you *hope*."

"Hmm? Oh, right."

"Let's be quiet now," Marvin groused. "We don't want to cause an avalanche."

The possibility of a spring avalanche seemed unlikely. There wasn't that much snow on the sides of the mountains. Still, after all we'd been through, it would be pretty stupid to get buried under a ton of frozen debris in this snazzy tuxedo.

Finally, the chariot drew up to a cliff face about ten stories tall. Sheets of ice glazed the rocks like a curtain of sugar. Underneath, the waterfall was slowly coming back to life, gurgling and shifting and pulsing with light.

"Bridal Veil Falls," Alex said. "I went ice climbing here a couple of times."

"But not in a wedding dress," I guessed. (Or maybe I *hoped*. Otis had confused me.)

"What do we do now?" Sam wondered.

“Well, it’s been four minutes,” Marvin said. “We’re not late.”

“Be a shame if we missed the doorway,” I said. (Pretty sure that was a *hope*.)

Right on cue, the ground rumbled. The waterfall seemed to stretch, waking up from its winter sleep, sloughing off icy sheets that splintered and crashed into the stream below. The cliff face split right down the middle, and the water sluiced to either side, revealing the mouth of a large cave.

From the darkness, a giantess emerged. She was about seven feet tall—petite for a giant. She wore a dress stitched entirely from white furs, which made me feel sad for the animals—polar bears, most likely—that had given their lives for it. The woman’s stark white hair was braided on either side of her face, and I kind of wished she had a veil, because, *yikes*. Her bulging eyes were the size of navel oranges. Her nose looked like it had been broken several times. When she grinned, her lips and teeth were stained black.

“Hello, there!” She had the same gravelly voice I remembered from my dream. I involuntarily flinched, afraid she might swat my pickle jar.

“I am Thrynga,” she continued, “princess of the earth giants, sister of Thrym, son of Thrym, son of Thrym! I am here to welcome my new sister-in-law.”

Alex turned toward me. I couldn’t see her face, but the small creaking sound in her throat seemed to mean *Abort! Abort!*

Sam curtseyed. She spoke in a higher-pitched tone than usual. “Thank you, Thrynga! My lady Samirah is delighted to be here. I am her maid of honor—”

“Prudence,” I offered.

Sam looked at me, her eye twitching above her bandit scarf. “Yes... Prudence. And this is—”

Before she could take revenge by naming me Clarabelle or Horatio Q. Pantaloons, I said, “Magnus Chase! Son of Frey and carrier of the bride-price. Nice to meet you.”

Thrynga licked her black-stained lips. Seriously, I wondered if she sucked on ballpoint pens in her spare time.

“Ah, yes,” she said. “You are on the guest list, son of Frey. And that is the Skofnung Sword you bear? Very good. I will take that.”

“Not until gifts are exchanged during the ceremony,” I said. “We want to observe tradition, don’t we?”

Thrynga's eyes flashed dangerously—and hungrily. "Of course. Tradition. And speaking of that..." From her polar-bear-fur sleeves, she produced a large stone paddle. I had a brief moment of terror, wondering if giants traditionally paddled their wedding guests.

"You don't mind if I do a quick security sweep?" Thrynga waved the wand over the goats. Then she inspected the chariot, and finally, us. "Good," she said. "No Aesir in the vicinity."

"My therapist says Marvin has a god complex," Otis volunteered. "But I don't think that counts."

"Shut up, or I'll destroy you," Marvin grumbled.

Thrynga frowned as she studied our chariot. "This vehicle looks familiar. It even smells familiar."

"Well, you know," I said, "lords and ladies often ride chariots to their weddings. This is a rental."

"Hmmm." Thrynga pulled at the white whiskers on her chin. "I suppose..." She glanced again at the Skofnung Sword on my back, a greedy gleam in her eyes. She motioned toward the cave entrance. "This way, little humans."

I didn't think it was fair of her to call us *little*. She was just a petite seven-footer herself, after all. She loped into the cavern and our goats followed, pulling the chariot straight through the middle of the broken waterfall.

The tunnel was smooth-bored and barely wide enough for our wheels. Ice coated the floor, which sloped downward at such a perilous angle I was afraid Otis and Marvin would slip and drag us to oblivion. Thrynga, however, seemed to have no problem keeping her footing.

We were about fifty feet into the tunnel when I heard the cave entrance closing behind us.

"Hey, Thrynga," I said, "shouldn't we leave that waterfall open? How will we get out after the ceremony?"

The giantess gave me an inky grin. "Get out? Oh, I wouldn't worry about that. Besides, we have to keep the entrance closed and the tunnel moving around. We wouldn't want anyone interfering with the happy day, would we?"

Sweat soaked the collar of my tuxedo. How long had that tunnel entrance remained open after we passed through—a minute? Two minutes? Had Thor

and his team been able to get inside? Had they been there at all? I heard nothing behind us, not even a discreet fart, so it was impossible to know.

My eyes felt jumpy in their sockets. My fingers twitched. I wanted to talk to Alex and Sam, to come up with some contingency plans in case things went wrong, but I couldn't do that with the white giantess Thrynga right in front of us.

As the giantess walked, she produced a chestnut from a pocket of her dress. She began absently tossing the nut into the air and catching it. This seemed like an odd lucky charm for a giant. Then again, I had a runestone that turned into a sword, so I shouldn't criticize.

The air got colder and thicker. The stone ceiling seemed to press down on us. I felt like we were sliding sideways, but I wasn't sure if that was the wheels on the ice, or the tunnel shifting through the earth, or my spleen banging on the side of my body, trying to get out.

"How far down does this tunnel go?" My voice echoed off the rock walls.

Thrynga chuckled, turning her chestnut in her fingers. "Scared of deep places, son of Frey? Not to worry. We're only going a bit farther. Of course, the road itself goes all the way to Helheim. Most subterranean passages do, eventually."

She paused to show me the bottom of her shoes, which were studded with iron spikes. "Giants and goats are best suited for such a road. You small ones would lose your footing and slide all the way to the Wall of Corpses. We can't have that."

For once, I agreed with the giantess.

The chariot rolled on. The smell of its flower garlands turned sweeter and cooler, reminding me of the funeral home where my mortal body had been displayed in a casket. I hoped I wouldn't have to have a second funeral. If I did, I wondered if I would be buried next to myself.

Thrynga's idea of "a bit farther" was four more hours of traveling. The goats didn't seem to mind, but I was going crazy with cold, anxiety, and boredom. I'd only had one cup of coffee and a few frowny pieces of doughnut at Sif's palace that morning. Now I felt hungry and strung out. I'd been reduced to an empty stomach, frayed nerves, and a full bladder. We saw no service stations or rest stops along the road. Not even a friendly bush. The girls must have also been suffering. They kept shifting from foot to foot and bouncing on their heels.

Finally, we reached a split in the tunnel. The main road continued down into the icy dark. But to the right, a short path dead-ended at a set of iron-studded oak doors with knockers fashioned like dragon heads.

The welcome mat read BLESS THIS CAVE!

Thrynga grinned. "We are here, little ones. I hope you're excited."

She pushed open the doors and our chariot rolled through...right into the barroom from *Cheers*.



## FORTY-NINE

### Thrym!

SUDDENLY, TAKING the road to Helheim didn't sound so bad.

No wonder Thrym's lair had seemed so familiar to me when I saw it through the pickle jar glass in my dream. The place was a near perfect replica of the Bull & Finch Pub, the inspiration for the old TV show *Cheers*.

Because it was across from the Public Garden, I'd been to the pub a few times when I was homeless—to get warm on a bitter winter's day or beg a hamburger from the patrons. The place was always full and rowdy, and somehow it made perfect sense to me that there would be an earth-giant equivalent.

As we rolled in, a dozen giants at the bar turned in our direction and raised their mead glasses. "Samirah!" they cried in unison.

More giants crowded the tables and booths, eating burgers and swilling down mead.

Most of the patrons were a bit larger than Thrynga. They were dressed in a riot of tuxedo pieces, fur, and armor that made my own outfit look positively understated.

I scanned the room but saw no sign of Loki or my Uncle Randolph. I wasn't sure whether to be relieved or worried. At the far end of the bar, on a simple wooden throne under the big-screen TV, sat the earth giant king himself: Thrym, son of Thrym, son of Thrym.

"At last!" he bellowed in his walrus voice.

The king rose unsteadily. He bore such an uncanny resemblance to Norm from the TV show I wondered if he got paid residuals. His body was perfectly round, stuffed into black polyester pants and a red T-shirt with a wide black tie. Fuzzy dark hair framed his moon face. He was the first giant I'd ever seen without facial hair, and I really wished he would grow some. His mouth was wet and pink. His chin was pretty much nonexistent. His voracious eyes fixed on Alex as if she were a luscious plate of cheeseburgers.

"My queen has arrived!" Thrym patted his ample belly. "We can begin the festivities!"

"Brother, you haven't even gotten changed yet!" yelled Thrynga. "And why is this place so filthy? I told you to clean up while I was gone!"

Thrym frowned. "What do you mean? We *did* clean up. We put on ties!"

"Ties!" yelled the crowd of giants.

"You worthless scoundrels!" Thrynga picked up the nearest stool and cracked it over the head of a random giant, who collapsed in a heap. "Turn off the television. Clean that counter! Sweep that floor! Wipe your faces!"

She wheeled on us. "Sorry about these idiots. I'll get them ready in no time."

"Yeah, that's fine," I said, dancing the I-need-to-pee dance. "Actually—restrooms?"

"Right down the hall there." Thrynga pointed. "Leave the chariot. I'll make sure no one eats your goats."

I helped Sam and Alex out of the chariot and we shuffled through the chaos, dodging mops and brooms and smelly giants while Thrynga moved through the crowd, shouting at her patrons to get ready for today's happy occasion quickly or she would rip their heads off.

The restrooms were located in the back, just where they would've been at Cheers. Fortunately, the area was empty except for one giant who was passed out and snoring in a corner booth, his face resting on a platter of nachos.

"I'm confused," Alex said. "Why is this Cheers?"

"A lot of elements bleed through from Boston to the other worlds," Sam said.

"Like Nidavellir looks like Southie," I said. "And Alfheim looks like Wellesley."

Alex shuddered. "Yeah, but I have to get married in Cheers?"

“Talk later,” I said. “Pee now.”

“Yep,” the girls said in unison.

Being a guy and not burdened by a wedding dress, I finished first. A few minutes later the girls reappeared, a tail of toilet paper trailing from the hem of Alex’s gown. I doubted any of the giants would’ve noticed or cared, but Sam removed it for her.

“You think our friends made it inside?” I asked.

“I hope so,” Alex said. “I’m so nervous I—URF!”

That last syllable sounded like a bear choking on a Tootsie Roll. I checked the corner booth to make sure the giant hadn’t heard it. He just muttered in his sleep and turned his head on his corn-chip pillow.

Sam patted Alex’s shoulder. “It’s okay.” She faced me. “Alex turned into a gorilla in the bathroom. She’ll be fine.”

“She what?”

“It happens,” Sam said. “With shape-shifters, if you get nervous and lose focus—”

Alex belched. “I’m better. I think I’m back to human now. Wait...” She shimmied in her dress like she was trying to dislodge a pebble. “Yeah. All good.”

I didn’t know if she was being serious or not. I wasn’t sure I wanted to know. “Alex, if you accidentally change shape while you’re out there among the giants—”

“I won’t,” she promised.

“Just keep silent,” Sam told her. “You’re supposed to be the shy blushing bride. I’ll do the talking. Follow my lead. We’ll stall as long as possible, hopefully give Th—our friends enough time to get in position.”

“But where is Loki?” I asked. “And my uncle?”

Sam got quiet. “Not sure. But we have to keep our eyes peeled. Once we see the ham—”

“There you are!” Thrynga emerged from the hallway. “We’re ready for you now.”

“Of course!” Sam said. “We were just, um, talking about how much we love ham. I hope there’s ham at the feast!”

I winked at her like, *Smooth. Otis-level smooth.*

Thrynga ushered us back into the bar. Judging from the smell, someone had sprayed a copious amount of lemon Pledge. Most of the broken glass and food droppings had been swept from the floor. The TV was off, and all

the giants were standing against the far wall in a line—their hair combed, their ties straightened, their shirts tucked in.

In unison, they chanted, “Good afternoon, Miss Samirah.”

Alex curtseyed.

The real Samirah said, “Good afternoon, uh, class. My lady Samirah is too overwhelmed to speak, but she is very happy to be here.”

Alex brayed like a donkey. The giants glanced uncertainly at Thrynga for etiquette tips.

King Thrym frowned. He’d put on a black tux jacket with a pink carnation pinned to the lapel, which made him look slightly more elegantly ugly. “Why does my bride sound like a donkey?”

“She is crying with joy,” Sam said quickly, “because she has finally seen her handsome husband!”

“Hmm.” Thrym ran a finger down his many chins. “That makes sense. Come, sweet Samirah! Sit by me, and we will begin the feast!”

Alex took the chair next to Thrym’s throne. Thrynga flanked her brother like a bodyguard, so Sam and I stood on the other side of Alex and tried to look official. Our job seemed to consist mostly of not eating, swatting aside the occasional mead mug that accidentally flew in Alex’s direction, and listening to our stomachs growl.

The first course was nachos. What was it with giants and nachos?

Thrynga kept grinning at me and eyeing the Skofnung Sword, which was still strapped to my back. It was clear that she coveted the blade. I wondered if anyone had told her it couldn’t be drawn in the presence of women. I assumed giantesses counted as women. I didn’t know what would happen if somebody tried to unsheathe Skofnung despite its restrictions, but I doubted it would be good.

*Try it, Jack’s voice hummed in my mind like he was having a pleasant dream. Oh, man, she’s so fine.*

*Go back to sleep, Jack, I told him.*

The giants laughed and shoveled down nachos, though they kept one eye on Thrynga as if making sure she wasn’t going to smash them with a barstool for bad behavior. Otis and Marvin stood in their harnesses right where we’d left them. Occasionally a stray nacho flew in their direction, and one of the goats would snatch it out of the air.

Thrym did his best to chat up Alex. She shied away and said nothing. Just to be polite, she snuck an occasional tortilla chip under her veil.

“She eats so little!” Thrym worried. “Is she all right?”

“Oh, yes,” Sam said. “She’s too excited to have much of an appetite, Your Majesty.”

“Hmm.” Thrym shrugged. “Well, at least I know she isn’t Thor!”

“Of course not!” Sam’s voice went up an octave. “Why would you think that?”

“Ages ago, when Thor’s hammer was first stolen by my grandfather—”

“Our grandfather,” Thrynga corrected, examining the ridges on her lucky chestnut.

“—Thor came disguised in a wedding dress to get it back.” Thrym’s wet lips curled inward like he was trying to locate his back teeth. “I remember that day, though I was only a child. The false bride ate an entire ox and drank two cases of mead!”

“Three cases,” Thrynga said.

“Thor could hide his body in a wedding dress,” Thrym said, “but he could not hide his appetite.” The giant smiled at Alex. “But don’t worry, Samirah, my love! I know you are not a god. I am smarter than my grandfather was!”

Thrynga rolled her huge eyes. “It’s *my* security that keeps out the Aesir, brother. No god could pass through our doors without triggering the alarms!”

“Yes, yes,” Thrym said. “At any rate, Samirah, you were all magically scanned the moment you came in. You are, as you should be, a child of Loki.” He knit his eyebrows. “Although so is your maid of honor.”

“We’re related!” said the real Sam. “That’s to be expected, isn’t it? A close relative often serves as maid of honor.”

Thrym nodded. “That’s true. At any rate, when this wedding is concluded, the House of Thrym shall regain its former stature! My grandfather’s failure will be put to rest. We will have a marriage alliance with the House of Loki.” He pounded his chest, causing his large belly to ripple and no doubt drowning entire nations of bacteria in his gut. “I will finally have my revenge!”

Thrynga turned her head, muttering, “I will have my revenge.”

“What’s that, sister?” Thrym demanded.

“Nothing.” She bared her black teeth. “Let’s have the second course, shall we?”

The second course was burgers. That *really* wasn’t fair. They smelled so good, my stomach rolled back and forth, throwing a temper tantrum.

I tried to distract myself by thinking of the fight to come. Thrym seemed dumb enough. Maybe we could actually beat him. Unfortunately, he was backed up by several dozen earth giants, and his sister worried me. I could tell Thrynga had her own agenda. Though she tried to conceal it, every once in a while she would glance at Alex with murderous hatred. I remembered something Heimdall had overheard her say...that they should just kill the bride as soon as she arrived. I wondered how long it would take the Aesir to get here once the hammer was revealed, and whether I could keep Alex alive for that long. I wondered where Loki was, and Uncle Randolph....

Finally the giants finished their meals. Thrym belched loudly and turned to his bride-to-be.

"At last, it is time for the ceremony!" he said. "Shall we be on our way?" My gut clenched. "On our way? What do you mean?"

Thrym chuckled. "Well, we're not doing the ceremony here. That would be rude! The entire wedding party is not present!"

The king rose and faced the wall opposite the bar. Giants scrambled out of the way, moving their tables and chairs.

Thrym thrust out his hand. The wall cracked opened and a new tunnel wormed its way through the earth. The sour, damp air from within reminded me of something I couldn't quite place...something bad.

"No." Sam sounded as if her throat were closing up. "No, we *can't* go there."

"But we *can't* have a wedding without the father of the bride!" Thrym announced cheerfully. "Come, my friends! My bride and I will say our vows in the cavern of Loki!"



## A Little Refreshing Poison in Your Face, Sir?

I REALLY HATE jigsaw puzzles. Did I ever mention that?

I especially hate it when I stare at a piece for hours, wondering where it goes, then somebody else comes along, slaps it into place, and says, *There, stupid!*

That's what I felt like when I finally figured out Loki's plan.

I remembered the maps strewn across Uncle Randolph's desk when Alex and I had visited. Maybe, in the back of my mind, I'd realized how strange that was at the time. Randolph's quest to find the Sword of Summer was over. Why would he still be poring over maps? But I hadn't asked Alex—or myself—about it. I'd been too distracted.

Now I was willing to bet Randolph had been studying topographical maps of New England, comparing them with ancient Norse charts and legends. He'd been ordered to undertake a different search—to find the coordinates of Loki's cavern in relation to the fortress of Thrym. If anyone could do it, my uncle could. That's why Loki had kept him alive.

No wonder Loki and Randolph weren't at the bar. They were waiting for us at the other end of the tunnel.

"We need our goats!" I yelled.

I waded through the crowd until I reached our chariot. I grabbed Otis's face and pressed my forehead against his.

"Testing," I whispered. "Is this goat on? Thor, can you hear me?"

"You have beautiful eyes," Otis told me.

“Thor,” I said, “red alert! We’re on the move. They’re taking us to Loki’s cave. I—I don’t know where that is. Tunnel is on the right-hand wall, angling down. Just—*find* us! Otis, did he get the message?”

“What message?” Otis asked dreamily.

“Magnus Chase!” the giant king yelled. “Are you ready?”

“Uh, yeah!” I called back. “We just have to ride in the chariot because... traditional wedding reasons.”

The other giants shrugged and nodded as if this made perfect sense to them. Only Thrynga looked suspicious. I feared she was starting to doubt whether the chariot was a rental.

Suddenly the bar felt much too small, with all the giants putting on their coats, straightening their ties, swigging the last of their mead, and trying to figure out their places in the wedding procession.

Samirah and Alex made their way to the chariot.

“What do we do?” Alex hissed.

“I don’t know!” Sam said. “Where’s our backup?”

“We’re going to be in the wrong place,” I said. “How will they find us?”

That was all we had time to say to one another before Thrym came over and took the reins of our goats. He pulled our chariot into the tunnel, his sister by his side, the rest of the giants filing in two by two behind us.

As soon as the last giants were inside the tunnel, the entrance behind us sealed shut.

“Hey, Thrym?” My voice bore an unfortunate resemblance to Mickey Mouse’s, making me wonder what sort of strange gasses were in this tunnel. “You sure it’s a good idea to trust Loki? I mean...wasn’t it *his* idea to sneak Thor into your grandfather’s wedding? Didn’t he help Thor kill your family?”

The giant king stopped so abruptly Marvin ran into him. I knew I was asking an impolite question, especially on the guy’s wedding day, but I was grasping for anything that might slow down the parade.

Thrym turned, his eyes like wet pink diamonds in the gloom. “Don’t you think I know that, human? Loki is a trickster. It is his nature. But *Thor* is the one who killed my grandfather, my father, my mother, my entire family!”

“Except for me,” Thrynga muttered. In the darkness, she glowed faintly—a seven-foot-tall apparition of ugliness. I hadn’t noticed that earlier. Maybe it was an ability that earth giants could turn off and on.

Thrym ignored her. “This marriage alliance is Loki’s way of *apologizing*; don’t you see? He realizes now that the gods were always his enemies. He regrets betraying my grandfather. We will combine our forces, take over Midgard, and then storm the city of the gods itself!”

Behind us, the giants let loose a deafening cheer. “Kill the humans!”

“Shut it!” Thrynga yelled. “We have humans with us!”

The giants murmured. Someone in the back said, “Present company excepted.”

“But, Great King Thrym,” Sam said, “do you really trust Loki?”

Thrym laughed. For such a big guy, he had tiny teeth. “In his cave, Loki is a prisoner. Helpless! He is inviting me there. He *gave* me the location. Why would he make such a gesture of trust?”

His sister snorted. “Gee, I don’t know, brother. Maybe because he needs an earth giant to tunnel into his place of imprisonment? Because he wants to be free?”

I was kind of wishing Thrynga was on our side, except for the fact that she was a power-hungry giantess bent on revenge and murdering all humans.

“We hold the power,” Thrym insisted. “Loki would not *dare* betray us. Besides, *I* am the one who will open his cave! He will be grateful! As long as he honors his part of the bargain, I will gladly let him go free. And the beautiful Samirah...” Thrym leered at Alex. “She is worth the risk.”

Under her veil, Alex squawked like a parrot. The noise was so loud Thrynga almost hit the ceiling.

“What was *that*?” the giantess demanded. “Is the bride choking?”

“No, no!” Sam patted Alex’s back. “That was just a nervous laugh. Samirah gets uncomfortable when people compliment her.”

Thrym chuckled. “Then she will be uncomfortable often when she is my wife.”

“Oh, Your Majesty!” Sam said. “Truer words have never been spoken!”

“Onward!” Thrym proceeded down the icy path.

I wondered if our delay had bought our backup troops any time. Assuming we even had backup troops. Could Thor still follow our progress through his goats’ eyes and ears? Did he have some way to get a message to Blitz and Hearth and my einherji hallmates from floor nineteen?

The tunnel closed behind us as we descended. I had a horrible vision of Thor in the giants’ barroom, trying to break through the wall with his corkscrew and hand drill.

After a few more minutes, the tunnel began to narrow. Thrym's progress slowed. I got the feeling that the earth itself was fighting him now, trying to push him back. Maybe the Aesir had placed some sort of magic barrier around Loki's tomb.

If so, it wasn't enough. We trudged onward and downward, though the chariot's axle now ground against the walls. Behind us, the giants walked single file. Next to me, Sam murmured softly—a chant in Arabic that I remembered from her prayers.

A foul smell wafted up from the depths—like sour milk, rotten eggs, and burned meat. I was afraid it was not Thor.

"I can sense him," Alex whispered, the first thing she'd said in almost an hour. "Oh, no, no, no..."

The tunnel widened suddenly, as if Thrym had finally burst through the earth's defenses. Our procession filed into the chamber of Loki.

I'd seen the place in my dream, but that didn't prepare me for the real thing. The cavern was about the size of a tennis court, with a high domed ceiling of cracked stone and broken stalactites, the remnants of which littered the floor. There were no other exits that I could see. The air was stale and sickly sweet with the stink of rot and burned flesh. Around the room, massive stalagmites rose from the floor. In other places, craters of viscous liquid bubbled and steamed, filling the cave with noxious gas. The temperature was about a hundred degrees, and all the earth giants tromping in didn't help with the heat or the smell.

In the center of the room, just as I'd seen in my dream, Loki lay prone on the floor, his ankles bound together and tied to one stalagmite, his arms spread wide and chained to two others.

Unlike the manifestations I'd seen of him before, the real Loki was neither handsome nor dashing. He wore nothing but a ragged loincloth. His body was emaciated, filthy, and covered with scars. His long stringy hair might once have been reddish brown, but it was now burned and bleached from centuries of being in this toxic cave. And his face—what was left of it—was a half-melted mask of scar tissue.

Coiled around the stalactite at Loki's head, a massive serpent stared down at the prisoner, its fangs dripping yellow venom.

At Loki's side knelt a woman in a white hooded robe. She was holding a metal bowl over Loki's face to catch the poison. The snake was a real

producer, though. The venom dripped from its mouth like a partially turned-on showerhead. The woman's bowl was much too small.

As we watched, venom filled it to the brim and the woman turned to empty it, tossing the contents into one of the boiling pools behind her. She moved quickly, but poison still splattered Loki's face. He writhed and screamed. The cavern shook. I thought the ceiling would collapse on top of us, but somehow it held. Maybe the gods had fashioned this chamber to endure the shaking, just as they'd fashioned Loki's bonds never to break, the snake never to run dry, and the woman's cup never to be big enough.

I wasn't religious, but the whole scene reminded me of a crucifix in a Catholic church—a man in excruciating pain, his arms outstretched. Of course, Loki was nobody's idea of a savior. He wasn't good. He wasn't sacrificing himself for something noble. He was an evil immortal paying for his crimes. Still, seeing him here in person—broken, filthy, and in agony—I couldn't help feeling pity. No one deserved this kind of punishment, not even a murderer and a liar.

The woman in white lifted her cup again to shield his face. Loki shook the poison from his eyes. He took a ragged breath and glanced in our direction.

"Welcome, Magnus Chase!" He gave me a hideous grin. "I hope you'll excuse me if I don't get up."

"Gods," I muttered.

"Oh, no; no gods here!" Loki said. "They never visit. They sealed us in and left us. It's just me and my lovely wife, Sigyn. Say hello, Sigyn."

The woman in white looked up. Under her hood, her face was so emaciated she might have been a draugr. Her eyes were solid red, her expression blank. Bloodred tears streamed down her leathery face.

"Oh, that's right." Loki's voice was even more acidic than the air. "Sigyn hasn't spoken in a thousand years—ever since the Aesir, in their infinite wisdom, butchered our sons and abandoned us here to suffer for eternity. But where are my manners? This is a happy occasion! How are you, Thrym, son of Thrym, son of Thrym, son of Thrym?"

The king didn't look so well. He kept swallowing, like his nachos weren't staying down. "H-hello, Loki. It's—it's actually just *three* Thryms. And I am ready to seal our alliance with a marriage."

"Yes, of course! Magnus, you've brought the Skofnung Sword."

It was a statement, not a question. He spoke with such authority, I had to resist the urge to unsling the blade and show it to him.

“We have it,” I said. “First things first. We want to see the hammer.”

Loki laughed—a wet, gurgling sound. “First, let’s make sure the bride is actually the bride. Come here, my dear Samirah. Let me see your face.”

Both girls lurched toward him like they were being pulled with ropes.

My pulse throbbed against the collar of my tux shirt. I should have considered that Loki would check under the girls’ veils. He was, after all, the god of deception. Despite Alex’s assurances that she could resist Loki’s orders, she staggered forward just like Samirah.

I wondered how fast I could get out my sword, how many giants I could kill. I wondered if Otis and Marvin would be any good in a fight. Probably too much to hope for that they were trained in goat fu.

“There we are,” Loki said. “Now let’s have the bride lift her veil, eh? Just to make sure everyone is playing fairly.”

Alex’s hands jerked upward like they were on marionette strings. She began to lift her veil. The cave was silent except for the bubbling of hot springs and the constant drip of poison into Sigyn’s cup.

Alex pushed her veil back over her head, revealing...Samirah’s face.

For a second, I panicked. Had the girls somehow switched places? Then I realized—I don’t know how, maybe something in her eyes—that Alex was still Alex. She’d shape-shifted to look like Sam, but whether or not that would fool Loki...

I curled my fingers around my pendant. The silence was long enough for me to begin mentally composing my will.

“Well...” Loki said at last. “I must admit I’m surprised. You actually followed orders. Good girl! I suppose that means your maid of honor is—”

Sigyn’s cup slipped, sloshing poison into Loki’s face. The god screamed and writhed in his bonds. The girls quickly retreated.

Sigyn righted her bowl. She tried to wipe the venom from Loki’s eyes with her sleeve, but that only made him scream more. Her hem came away smoking and full of holes.

“Stupid woman!” Loki wailed.

For a moment, Sigyn seemed to meet my gaze, though it was hard to be sure with those solid-red eyes. Her expression didn’t change. The tears kept flowing. But I wondered if she had spilled that poison on purpose. I didn’t

know why she would. As far as I knew, she'd been kneeling at her husband's side faithfully for centuries. Still...it seemed an oddly timed mistake.

Thrynga cleared her throat—a beautiful sound, like a chain saw cutting through mud. "You asked about the maid of honor, Lord Loki. She says her name is Prudence."

Loki cackled, still trying to blink the poison from his eyes. "I'm sure she did. Her real name is Alex Fierro, and I told her not to come today, but no matter! Let us proceed. Thrynga, have you brought the special guest I requested?"

The giantess curled her ink-stained lips. She brought out the chestnut she'd been tossing around earlier.

"Your special guest is a nut?" I asked.

Loki laughed hoarsely. "You could say that. Go on, Thrynga."

Thrynga stuck her thumbnail into the shell and cracked the nut open. She tossed it to the floor, and something small and dark rolled out—not the meat of a chestnut, but a tiny human form. It grew in size until a stout old man stood before me—his rumpled black tuxedo dusted with plant chaff, his cheek marked with a ghastly burn scar in the shape of a hand.

Whatever optimism I'd been holding on to shed faster than Sif's golden hair.

"Uncle Randolph."

"Hello, Magnus," he said, his face contorted with misery. "Please, my boy...give me the Skofnung blade."



## FIFTY-ONE

# Hello, Paranoia, My Old Friend

### THIS IS WHY I HATE FAMILY REUNIONS.

You always have to face that one uncle you don't want to see—you know, the one who pops out of a nutshell and demands a sword.

Part of me was tempted to smack Randolph upside the head with the Skofnung Stone. Part of me wanted to shove him back into his chestnut, tuck him safely into my pocket, and get him away from Loki. None of me was tempted to give him the sword that could cut Loki free.

“I can’t do that, Randolph,” I said.

My uncle winced. His right hand was still bandaged from where I’d cut off two of his fingers. He pressed it against his chest and reached out with his left, his eyes desperate and heavy. A coppery taste spread over my tongue. I realized my rich uncle now looked more like a beggar than I ever had during my two years on the streets.

“Please,” he said. “I was supposed to bring it today, until you took it. I—*I need it.*”

That was his job, I realized. Along with finding the location of this cave, he had been charged with freeing Loki, wielding the Skofnung Sword as only one of noble blood could do.

“Loki won’t give you what you want,” I told him. “Your family is gone.”

He blinked as if I’d thrown sand in his eyes. “Magnus, you don’t understand—”

“No sword,” I said. “Not until we see Thor’s hammer.”

The giant king scoffed. “The hammer is the morgen-gifu, silly human! It will not be given until after the wedding night!”

Next to me, Alex shuddered. The golden arcs of her necklace reminded me of the Rainbow Bridge, the way she had laid down so casual and relaxed on the Bifrost, making angels in the light. I couldn’t allow her to be forced into marrying a giant. I just wished I knew how to stop it.

“We need the hammer to bless the wedding,” I said. “That is the bride’s right. Let us see it and use it in the ceremony. Then you can take it back until...until tomorrow.”

Loki laughed. “I don’t think so, Magnus Chase. Nice try, though! Now Skofnung—”

“Hold on.” Thrynga fixed Loki with her I’m-about-to-hit-you-with-a-barstool glare. “The girl is within her rights. If she wants the blessing of the hammer, she should have it. Or does my brother wish to break our sacred tradition?”

Thrym flinched. His gaze flitted from his sister to his followers to Loki. “I...er...no. That is, yes. My bride, Samirah, may receive the blessing. At the proper time in the ceremony, I will bring forth Mjolnir. Shall we begin?”

Thrynga’s eyes glittered wickedly. I didn’t know what her game was, why she wanted to bring out the hammer early, but I wasn’t going to argue.

Thrym clapped his hands. I hadn’t noticed before, but a few giants in the back of the procession had brought some pieces of furniture with them from the bar. Just to the left of Loki’s binding place, they set down a plain wooden bench and covered the seat with furs. On either side of the bench, they placed a freestanding post like a totem pole, each one carved with fierce animal faces and runic inscriptions.

Thrym sat. The bench groaned under his weight. One of his giants placed a crown of stone on his head—a circlet carved from a single piece of dark granite.

“Girl, you stand there,” the giantess told Alex, “between your father and your husband-to-be.”

Alex hesitated.

Loki made a *tsk-tsk* sound. “Come now, daughter. Don’t be shy. Stand next to me.”

Alex did as she was told. I wanted to believe it was because she was playing the charade and not because she was being compelled, but I

remembered the way she'd been yanked around as if by a rope earlier at Loki's command.

Sam stood to my right, her hands clasped anxiously. Randolph shuffled off to wait by Loki's feet. He hunched there like a guilty mastiff that had come back from the hunt with no dead animal for his master.

"The cup!" Thrym ordered.

One of his men placed a jewel-encrusted goblet in his fingers. Red liquid sloshed over the brim.

Thrym took a swig. Then he offered the cup to Alex. "Samirah al-Abbas bint Loki, I give you drink, and with it the binding promise of my love. By my troth, you shall be my wife."

Alex took the cup in her lace-covered fingers. She looked around, as if for guidance. It occurred to me that she might not be able to imitate Sam's voice as well as her face.

"You need not speak, girl," Thrynga said. "Just drink!"

Me, I would have been concerned about backwash, but Alex lifted the bottom of her veil and took a sip.

"Excellent." Thrynga turned to me, her facial muscles twitching with impatience. "Now, at last, the mundr. Give me the sword, boy."

"Sister, no," Thrym rumbled. "It does not go to you."

Thrynga wheeled on her brother. "What? I am your only kin! The bride-price must pass through my hands!"

"I have an arrangement with Loki." Thrym looked more confident now, almost smug, with Alex so close at hand. I had a terrible feeling he was imagining the end of the ceremony, his chance to kiss the bride. "Boy, give the sword to your uncle. He will hold it."

Thrynga glared at me. Looking in her eyes, I realized what she wanted. She intended to claim Skofnung for herself, and probably Mjolnir, too. She had no interest in a marriage alliance with Loki. She saw this wedding as a chance to wrest the throne from her brother. She would kill anyone who stood in her way. Maybe she didn't know that the Skofnung Sword couldn't be unsheathed in the presence of a woman. Maybe she thought she could use it anyway. Or maybe she was happy wielding the power of a barstool, as long as the other two weapons were safely locked up and in her possession.

Under different circumstances, I might have wished her luck assassinating her brother. Heck, I would have even given her a trophy good

for half-price entrées in Asgard. Unfortunately, I got the feeling Thrynga's plan also included killing me, Sam, Alex, and probably Uncle Randolph.

I took a step back. "I told you, Thrym. No hammer, no sword."

Randolph shuffled toward me, his bandaged hand cradled against his cummerbund. "Magnus, you must," he said. "This is the order of the ceremony. Mundr must be given first, and each wedding *requires* an ancestral sword to put the rings on. The blessing of the hammer comes afterward."

Jack's pendant hummed against my collarbone. Maybe he was trying to warn me. Or maybe he just wanted to get another look at Skofnung, babe among swords. Or maybe he was jealous because *he* wanted to be the ceremonial sword.

"What is it, boy?" Thrym grumbled. "I have already promised that the traditional rights will be observed. Do you not trust us?"

I almost laughed out loud.

I looked at Sam. As discreetly as she could, she signed, *No choice. But watch him.*

Suddenly I felt stupid. This whole time, we could have been using sign language to give each other secret messages.

On the other hand, Loki might be controlling Sam, making her say that. Could he get inside her mind without even saying anything, without even snapping his fingers? I remembered what Sam had told me in Sif's atrium: *You have to stop him. If we're incapacitated, you may be the only one who can.* For all I knew, I was the only one in the room *not* under Loki's control.

Wow. Hello, paranoia.

Two dozen giants watched me. My uncle extended his good hand.

I happened to meet Sigyn's blank red eyes. The goddess inclined her head ever so slightly. I don't know why that convinced me, but I unslung the sword and put Skofnung in Randolph's hand, the stone hanging heavily from the pommel.

"You are still a Chase," I said quietly. "You still have *living* family."

Randolph's eye twitched. He took the sword mutely.

He knelt before the king's bench. With some fumbling due to his bandaged hand, he held the sheath horizontally like a serving tray. Thrym placed two gold wedding rings in the center and held his hand over them like a blessing.

“Ymir, ancestor of the gods and giants, hear my words,” he said. “These rings signify our marriage.”

He slipped one ring on his own finger and one on Alex’s. Then he waved off Uncle Randolph. My uncle shuffled back with the sword, but Sam and I moved to intercept, blocking him from getting any closer to Loki.

I was about to insist on the hammer, but Thrynga beat me to it. “Brother, honor your promise.”

“Yes, yes,” Thrym agreed. “Samirah, my dear, please sit.”

Alex stepped forward, trancelike, and sat at the giant’s side. It was hard to tell under the veil, but she seemed to be staring at the ring on her hand as if it were a brown recluse spider.

“Giants, stand ready,” Thrym said. “You will surround the hammer and bring it here. You will hold it over my bride, *very carefully*, while we say the blessing. Then I will immediately send it back into the earth...” He turned to Alex. “Until tomorrow morning, my sweet, when it will be officially your morgen-gifu. After that, I’ll be sure to keep it safe for you.” He patted Alex’s knee, which she seemed to enjoy almost as much as the poisonous wedding ring.

Thrym extended his hand. He strained, his face turning the color of mulberry jam. The cavern rumbled. About twenty feet away, the floor cracked open, and gravel and mud pushed upward as if some huge insect were tunneling out. The hammer of Thor emerged and settled in a caldera of rubble.

It looked just as I’d seen it in my dream: a huge trapezoidal head of metal with swirling runic designs, and a thick short handle bound in leather. Its presence filled the room with a smell like thunderstorms. While the giants hurried to surround the hammer, I signed to Sam: *Watch Randolph*. Then I scooted in the other direction, toward our chariot.

I grabbed Otis’s snout and pressed my face against his.

“We’re a go,” I whispered. “Hammer is in the cave. I repeat: hammer is in the cave. Red October. Eagle has landed. Defense Pattern Omega!”

I’m not sure where the military code stuff came from. I just figured it was the sort of thing Thor would respond to. And, hey, I was nervous.

“You have beautiful eyes,” Otis murmured.

“Bring the hammer here!” Thrym told his giants. “Be quick about it!”

“Yes,” Loki agreed, shaking the poison-soaked hair out of his eyes. “And while you’re doing that...Randolph, cut me free.”

That's when Alex snapped.



## FIFTY-TWO

# My Uncle Gets Some Backup Singers

ALEX RIPPED OFF her veil, whipped her new golden garrote from her waist, and looped it around Thrym's neck. The giant king rose, bellowing in outrage, as Alex scrambled onto his back and began choking him like she'd done with the lindworm in Valhalla.

"I want a divorce!" she yelled.

Thrym's face turned an even deeper purple. His eyes bulged. His throat should have been cut clean through, but the skin around the garrote seemed to be turning to gleaming gray rock—stupid earth giants and their stupid earth magic.

"Treachery!" Thrynga's eyes danced with excitement, as if she finally saw a chance to do some treachery of her own. "Bring me the hammer!" She lunged for Mjolnir, but Samirah's ax hurtled across the room and embedded itself in Thrynga's side. The giantess fell forward like she was stealing second base.

I summoned Jack. Uncle Randolph was almost at Loki's side. Before I could reach him, giants surrounded me.

Jack and I leaped into action, working together efficiently for once, cleaving through one earth giant after another. But we were badly outnumbered and the giants (OBVIOUS FACT ALERT) were *really* big. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Thrynga clawing across the floor, trying to reach the now-unguarded hammer. Thrym was still staggering around the room, slamming his back against the cave wall in an attempt to dislodge

Alex, but each time he tried, Alex changed into a gorilla, which just made it easier for her to strangle Thrym. The giant's tongue was the size and color of an unripe plantain. He stretched his hand toward Thor's hammer, probably trying to send it back into the earth, but Alex tightened her garrote and broke his concentration.

Meanwhile, Sam ripped off her own veil. Her Valkyrie spear appeared in her hand, flooding the room with white radiance. Two more giants charged toward her, blocking my line of vision.

Somewhere behind me, Loki screamed, "Now, you fool!"

"I—I can't!" Randolph wailed. "There are women present!"

The god snarled. I suppose he could've forced Alex and Sam to pass out, but that wouldn't solve the problem of Thrynga and Sigyn.

"Unsheathe it anyway," he ordered. "Curse the consequences!"

"But—"

"DO IT!"

I was too busy dodging clubs and stabbing giants to see what happened, but I heard the Skofnung Sword being drawn. It let loose an unearthly howl—an outraged chorus of twelve berserker spirits unleashed against their will and in violation of their ancient taboo.

The sound was so loud it gave me double vision. Several giants stumbled. Unfortunately, Jack had also been affected. He turned heavy and inanimate in my hands just as one of the giants backhanded me, sending me flying across the cavern.

I slammed into a stalagmite. Something in my chest went *crack*. That probably wasn't good. I struggled to rise, trying to ignore the acid now sloshing around in my rib cage.

My vision swam. Uncle Randolph was screaming, his voice blending with the howl of the Skofnung spirits. Mist swirled around him, pluming from the blade as if it had turned to dry ice.

"Hurry, you fool!" Loki yelled. "Before the sword dissolves!"

Sobbing, Randolph struck the bonds at Loki's feet. With a sound like a high-tension wire snapping on a bridge, the ties broke.

"No!" Sam shouted. She lunged forward, but the damage had been done. Loki brought his knees to his chest for the first time in a thousand years. Sigyn retreated against the far wall, allowing the snake's venom to splash freely in her husband's face. Loki screamed and thrashed.

Sam thrust her spear at my uncle, but Loki still had enough presence of mind to yell, “Samirah, freeze!”

Sam did, her teeth clenched with effort. Her eyes burned with rage. She let loose a guttural howl almost worse than the Skofnung Sword’s, but she couldn’t seem to break Loki’s command.

Randolph staggered, staring at his smoking sword. The edge was corroding, the black gunk from Loki’s bindings chewing away at the magical blade.

“The stone, you idiot!” Loki kicked at him futilely, turning his face away from the trickle of venom. “Sharpen the blade and get on with it! You only have a few minutes!”

Smoke continued swirling around Randolph. His skin was starting to turn blue. I realized it wasn’t just the sword that was dissolving. The enraged spirits of Skofnung, still howling, were taking out their anger on my uncle.

A giant charged me with a ceremonial totem pole. I managed to roll out of the way—my cracked ribs throbbing in protest—and cripple the giant by stabbing his ankles.

Alex was still throttling the giant king. Both of them looked pretty bad. Thrym stumbled, his hands clawing sluggishly at his bride. Blood trickled from Alex’s ear, spattering her white dress. I hoped Sif didn’t expect us to return it dry-cleaned.

Three of the giants had surrounded Thor’s hammer again. Now they picked it up, staggering under its weight.

“What do we do with it?” one groaned. “Put it back in the earth?”

“Don’t you dare!” Thrynga yelled. She was on her feet now, clutching the ax still embedded in her side. “That hammer is mine!”

Granted, I didn’t know the rules of earth magic, but judging from the effort it had taken Thrym to retrieve the hammer, I doubted any of the giants would be able to sink it eight miles into the earth again right away—not in the middle of a battle with weapons flying and berserker spirits howling. I was more concerned about the sword.

Randolph had already re-sharpened the blade. As Sam screamed at him to stop, he moved toward Loki’s right hand.

“Thrynga!” I yelled.

The white giantess glared at me, her inky lips curled into a snarl.

“You want the sword for yourself...?” I said, pointing to my uncle.  
“You’d better hurry.”

It seemed like a good idea, turning a murderous giantess on Loki.

Unfortunately, Thrynga also hated *me*. “That sword is finished,” she said. “Already dissolving. But perhaps I’ll take yours!”

She charged. I tried to raise Jack, but he was still dead weight in my hand. Thrynga plowed into me and we both skidded across the floor—straight into one of the bubbling pits.

News flash: Pits of boiling liquid are *hot*.

Had I been a regular mortal, I would have died in seconds. Being an einherji, I figured I had a minute or so before the heat killed me. Hooray.

My world was reduced to a boiling roar, a sulfurous yellow haze, and the white shape of the giantess, whose fingers were digging into my windpipe.

Jack was still in my grip, but that arm felt heavy and useless. With my free hand, I clawed blindly at Thrynga, trying to break her grip on my throat.

By chance, my fingers found the shaft of Sam’s ax, still buried in Thrynga’s side. I yanked it free and swung it in the general vicinity of the giantess’s head.

The pressure on my throat abruptly loosened. I pushed the giantess away and flailed for the surface. Somehow I pulled myself, steaming and lobster red, out of the hot springs.

More sounds of battle: Blades clanging against blades. Rocks shattering. Giants roaring. The Skofnung Sword’s spirits continued their bitter howling. I tried to get up, but my skin felt like a cooked sausage casing. I was afraid that if I moved too fast, I might literally burst.

“Jack,” I croaked, “go.”

Jack left my grip, but he was moving slowly. Maybe he was still dazed by the howling of the spirits. Maybe my own condition was weakening him. It was all he could do to keep the giants from finishing me off.

My vision was cloudy white with yellow blobs, as though my eyeballs had turned into hard-boiled eggs. I saw Thrym stagger to the wedding bench, grab it in both hands, and with one final burst of strength, swing it over his head at Alex. It crashed against her scalp, and she dropped off the giant’s back.

Nearby, I heard another high-tension *SNAP*. Loki’s right hand was free.

“Yes!” the god cried. He rolled to one side, out of the snake’s range. “The last one, Randolph, and your family will be returned to you!”

Sam was still frozen. She struggled against Loki’s will so intensely that a capillary had burst across her forehead, making a dotted red line there. In the

light of her spear, Randolph's face looked bluer than ever. His skin was turning translucent, the structure of his skull showing through as he hurried to sharpen the Skofnung blade for one last strike.

Three giants were still staggering around with Thor's hammer, not sure what to do with it. The giant king turned toward Alex, who now lay stunned on the floor. Another giant approached Sam warily, eyeing her glowing spear, obviously wondering if she was really as helpless as she looked.

"Jack," I murmured, my voice like wet sand. But I didn't know what to tell him. I was barely able to move. A dozen giants were still in fighting shape. Loki was almost free. I couldn't save Alex and Sam *and* stop my uncle all at the same time. It was over.

Then the cavern shook. A bulging rift split the ceiling like the opening claws of a grabber arm—spilling out a dwarf, an elf, and several einherjar.

Blitz struck first. Just as Thrym looked up, momentarily distracted from his desire to kill his bride, a dwarf in paisley chain mail landed on his face. Blitz wasn't heavy, but he had gravity and surprise on his side. The giant king crumpled beneath him like a pile of blocks.

Hearthstone hit the cavern floor with his usual elfish grace and immediately tossed a rune at Loki:



I guess the *I* stood for *ice*. Suddenly, the god of evil was encased in the stuff, his eyes wide with shock, his left arm still bound to the last stalagmite—making him the ugliest frozen treat I had ever seen.

My comrades from floor nineteen launched themselves into battle with glee.

"Death and glory!" Halfborn roared.

"Kill everyone!" Mallory said.

"Charge!" T.J. yelled.

T.J. bayoneted the nearest giant. Mallory's knives flashed as she took out two more with well-placed crotch strikes. (Tip: Don't ever fight Mallory Keen without titanium crotch armor.) Halfborn Gunderson, our own version of a giant, waded into the battle—shirtless, as usual, with bloodred smiley

faces painted all over his chest (I assumed Mallory had gotten bored on the tunneling trip down here). Laughing insanely, Halfborn grabbed a giant's head and introduced it to his left knee. Halfborn's knee won.

With Loki frozen, Samirah was able to shake herself free of his control. She immediately put her spear to work, impaling an advancing giant then threatening Uncle Randolph. "Back off!" she snarled.

For a moment, I thought the tide had turned. Giants fell one after another. I summoned Jack to my hand, and despite my overcooked condition, despite my exhaustion, I managed to get to my feet. The presence of my friends energized me. I staggered over to Alex and helped her up.

"I'm good," she muttered, though she looked disoriented and bloody. How she had survived being bashed with a bench was beyond me. I guess she was hardheaded. "He—he didn't control me. Loki didn't. I—I was pretending."

She gripped my hand, obviously concerned that I might not believe her.

"I know, Alex." I squeezed her hand. "You did great."

Meanwhile, Blitzen hit Thrym repeatedly in the face with his chain mail bow tie. As he did so, he looked up at me and grinned. "Thor got in touch with us, kid. Nice work! It was actually easier for *me* to tunnel here once I knew the location. The gods are still digging their way in from this idiot's lair. The rock is magically hardened, by this guy"—he punched Thrym in the face again—"but they'll get through it."

The bodies of fallen giants lay strewn across the cavern. The last three standing were the ones guarding Thor's hammer, but they'd been staggering around so much with Mjolnir, back and forth from Thrym to Thrynga like a moving crew with an oversize couch, that now they looked completely spent. Halfborn Gunderson made short work of them with his battle-ax. Then he stood triumphantly over them, rubbing his hands eagerly. "I've always wanted to try this!" He strained to lift Mjolnir, but the hammer stayed stubbornly in place.

Mallory snorted. "Like I keep telling you, you are *not* as strong as three giants. Now help me over here—"

"Look out!" Alex cried.

Halfborn's effort with the hammer had distracted us from Uncle Randolph and Loki. I turned just as the block of ice shattered, spraying us with frozen shards.

In the moment we were blinded, my uncle lunged forward with Skofnung. He struck the last restraint around Loki's left wrist, snapping the bonds.

The sword dissipated in a puff of smoke. The chorus of angry berserkers went silent. My uncle dropped to his knees, screaming, his arm beginning to dissolve into blue vapor.

In the back of the cave, Sigyn cringed as her husband rose to his feet.

"Free," Loki said, his emaciated body steaming, his face a wasteland of scarred flesh. "Now the fun begins."



## FIFTY-THREE

# It's Hammer Time! (Someone Had to Say It)

### TIMING.

The Aesir *really* needed to work on their timing.

We still had no godly backup. We had a hammer, but no one to wield it. And Loki stood unchained before us in all his mutilated glory, ice clinging to his hair, poison dripping from his face.

“Ah, yes.” He smiled. “For my first act...”

He lashed out with more speed and strength than should have been possible for a guy who’d been chained up for a thousand years. He grabbed the snake that had been dripping venom on him, yanked it off its stalactite, and snapped it like a whip.

Its spine cracked with a sound like Bubble Wrap popping. Loki dropped it, as lifeless as a garden hose, and turned toward us.

“I really hated that snake,” he said. “Who’s next?”

Jack lay heavy in my hand. Alex could barely stand. Sam had her spear ready, but she seemed reluctant to charge, probably because she didn’t want to be to be frozen by her father again...or worse.

My other friends closed ranks around me: three strong einherjar, Blitzen in his fashionable chain mail, Hearthstone with his rowan-wood runes clacking in their bag as his fingers shifted through them.

“We can take him,” T.J. said, his bayonet wet with giant blood. “All at once. Ready?”

Loki spread his arms in a welcoming gesture. Randolph knelt at his feet, silent in agony as the blue vapor spread up his arm, eating away at his flesh. Against the far wall, Sigyn stood very still, her pure red eyes impossible to read, her empty poison bowl clasped to her chest.

“Come on, then, warriors of Odin,” Loki taunted. “I’m unarmed and weak. You can do it!”

That’s when I knew in my heart that we couldn’t. We would charge in and die. We’d end up lying on the floor with our spines snapped, just like that snake.

But we had no choice. We had to try.

Then, from the wall behind us came a cracking sound, followed by a familiar voice. “We’re through! Yes, Heimdall. I’m sure this time. Probably.”

The end of an iron staff poked through the rock and wriggled around. The wall began to crumble.

Loki lowered his arms and sighed. He looked more annoyed than terrified.

“Ah, well.” He winked at me, or maybe his face was just convulsing from centuries of poison damage. “Next time?”

The ground crumbled underneath him. The entire back half of the cavern fell away. Stalagmites and stalactites imploded. Pools of boiling liquid turned into steaming waterfalls before disappearing into the void. Loki and Sigyn fell into nothingness. My uncle, who had been kneeling at the edge of the break, also slipped into the chasm.

“Randolph!” I scrambled to the edge.

About fifty feet below, Randolph crouched on a wet and steaming slope of rock, trying to keep his balance. His right arm was gone, the blue vapor now crawling up his shoulder. He looked up at me, his skull grinning through his translucent face.

“Randolph, hold on!” I said.

“No, Magnus.” He spoke softly, as if he didn’t want to wake anyone. “My family—”

“I am your family, you old idiot!”

Maybe that wasn’t the most endearing thing to say. Maybe I should’ve thought *good riddance* and let him fall. But Annabeth was right. Randolph *was* family. The whole Chase clan attracted the gods’ attention, and Randolph had borne that curse more heavily than most of us. Despite everything, I still wanted to help him.

He shook his head, sadness and pain fighting for dominance in his eyes.  
“I’m sorry. I want to see them.”

He slipped sideways into the darkness without a sound.

I had no time to grieve, no time even to process what had happened, before three gods in tactical armor burst into the cave.

They all wore helmets, infrared goggles, jackboots, and full Kevlar body armor with the letters GRRM across the chest. I might have mistaken them for a regular SWAT team except for the excessive facial hair and the non-standard-issue weapons.

Thor stormed in first, holding his iron staff like a rifle, pointing it in every direction.

“Check your corners!” he yelled.

The next god through was Heimdall, grinning like he was having an excellent time. He also held his massive sword like a gun, his Phablet of Doomsday stuck to the end. He swept the room, taking pictures of himself from every angle.

The third guy I didn’t recognize. He stepped into the cavern with a *CLANG* because his right foot was encased in the most grotesque oversize shoe I had ever seen. It was cobbled together from scraps of leather and metal, pieces of neon athletic shoes, Velcro straps, and old brass buckles. It even had half a dozen stiletto heels sticking up from the toe like porcupine quills.

The three gods scampered around looking for threats.

With incredibly bad timing, the giant king Thrym began to regain consciousness. The god with the weird shoe rushed over and raised his right foot. His boot grew to the size of a Lincoln Town Car—a junkyard wedge of old shoe parts and scrap metal all compacted together into a huge death-stomper. Thrym didn’t even have time to scream before Shoe Man stepped on him.

*SPLAT.* No more threat.

“Good one, Vidar!” Heimdall called. “Could you do that again so I can snap a picture?”

Vidar frowned and pointed at the mess. In perfect ASL, he signed, *He is flat now.*

Across the room, Thor gasped. “My baby!”

He ran past his goats and snatched up the hammer Mjolnir. “At last! Are you okay, Mee-Mee? Did those nasty giants reprogram your channels?”

Marvin jingled the bells on his collar. “We’re fine, boss,” he muttered. “Thanks for asking.”

I looked at Sam. “Did he just call his hammer Mee-Mee?”

Alex growled, “Hey, Aesir idiots!” She pointed to the newly formed abyss. “Loki went that way.”

“Loki?” Thor turned. “Where?” Lightning flickered through his beard, which probably rendered his infrared goggles useless.

With even worse timing than Thrym, the giantess Thrynga chose that moment to show she was still alive. She launched herself from the nearest cesspool like a breaching whale and landed at Heimdall’s feet, gasping and steaming.

“Kill you all!” she croaked, which wasn’t the smartest thing to say when facing three gods in tactical armor.

Thor pointed his hammer at Thrynga as casually as if he were channel surfing. Tendrils of lightning shot from the runes engraved in the metal. The giantess burst into a million bits of rubble.

“Dude!” Heimdall complained. “What did I tell you about lightning so close to my phablet? You want to fry the motherboard?”

Thor grunted. “Well, mortals, it’s a good thing we arrived when we did, or that giantess might have hurt someone! Now, what were you saying about Loki?”

The thing about gods is, you can’t really slap them when they’re acting stupid.

They’ll just slap you back and kill you.

Besides, I was too exhausted, shocked, boiled, and grief-stricken to complain much, even though the Aesir had let Loki get away.

No, I corrected myself. We *let Loki get away*.

While Thor murmured sweet nothings to his hammer, Heimdall stood at the edge of the chasm and peered into the darkness. “Goes all the way to Helheim. No sign of Loki.”

“My uncle?” I asked.

Heimdall’s white irises turned toward me. For once, he wasn’t smiling. “You know, Magnus...sometimes it’s best not to look as far as you’re *able* to look, or to listen to everything you’re able to hear.”

He patted me on the shoulder and walked away, leaving me to wonder what the heck he meant.

Vidar, the god with the shoe, went around checking for wounded, but everybody seemed more or less okay—everybody aside from the giants, that is. All of them were now dead. Halfborn had pulled his groin trying to pick up Thor's hammer. Mallory had given herself a stomachache laughing at him, but both those problems were easily fixed. T.J. had come through without a scratch, though he was worried how to get earth-giant blood off the stock of his rifle.

Hearthstone was fine, though he kept signing *othala*, the name of his missing runestone. He signed to Blitz that he could have stopped Loki if he'd had it. I suspected he was just being too hard on himself, but I wasn't sure. As for Blitz, he leaned against the cave wall and sipped from a canteen, looking tired after stone-sculpting all the way into Loki's cavern.

As soon as the gods had arrived, Jack had turned back into a pendant, muttering something about not wanting to see Heimdall's diva sword. In truth, I think he mostly felt guilty that he hadn't been more help to us, and sorry that Skofnung had turned out not to be the blade of his dreams. Now Jack hung around my neck again, snoozing fitfully. Fortunately, he hadn't suffered any damage. And he'd been so stunned throughout most of the fight that I'd hardly absorbed any fatigue from him at all. He would live to fight (and sing top-forty songs) another day.

Sam, Alex, and I sat at the edge of the chasm, listening to the echoes in the darkness. Vidar wrapped my ribs, then dabbed some salve on my arms and face and told me in sign language that I wouldn't die. He also bandaged Alex's ear and signed, *Minor concussion. Stay awake.*

Sam herself had no major physical injuries, but I could sense the emotional pain radiating from her. She sat with her spear across her lap like a kayak paddle, looking as though she were ready to navigate straight to Helheim. I think Alex and I both knew instinctively that we shouldn't leave her alone.

"I was helpless again," she said miserably. "He just...he *controlled* me."

Alex patted her leg. "Not entirely true. You're alive."

I looked back and forth between them. "What do you mean?"

Alex's darker eye was more dilated than the lighter one—probably because of the concussion. It made her stare look even more hollow and shell-shocked.

"When things went bad during the fight," she said, "Loki just...willed us to die. He told my heart to stop beating, my lungs to stop breathing. I assume

he did the same to Sam.”

Samirah nodded, her knuckles whitening on the shaft of her spear.

“Gods.” I didn’t know what to do with all the anger inside me. My chest boiled at the same temperature as the cesspool. If I hadn’t hated Loki enough already, now I was determined to follow him to the ends of the Nine Worlds and...and do something really bad to him.

*Like tie him down with his children’s guts? asked a little voice in my head. Put a venomous snake over his face? How did that sort of justice work out for the Aesir?*

“So you *did* resist him,” I told the girls. “That’s good.”

Alex shrugged. “I told you, he can’t control me. Earlier, I was just acting so he wouldn’t get suspicious. But, Sam, yeah...that was a good first start. You stayed alive. You can’t expect complete resistance right away. We can work on it together—”

“He’s free, Alex!” Sam snapped. “We failed. *I* failed. If I’d been faster, if I’d realized—”

“*Failed?*” The thunder god loomed over us. “Nonsense, girl! You retrieved my hammer! You are heroes and will all receive trophies!”

I could see Sam gritting her teeth, trying not to yell at Thor. I was afraid she’d bust another capillary from the strain.

“I appreciate that, Lord Thor,” she said at last. “But Loki never cared about the hammer. It was all a smokescreen to get himself freed.”

Thor frowned and raised Mjolnir. “Oh, don’t you worry, lass. We’ll put Loki back in chains. And I promise you, he *will* care about this hammer when I ram it down his throat!”

Brave words, but when I looked around at my friends, I could tell that no one was reassured.

I stared at the letters on Thor’s Kevlar vest. “What is G-R-R-M, anyway?”

“It’s pronounced *grrm*,” Thor said. “An acronym for *God Rapid Response Mobilization*.”

“Rapid?” Alex snarled. “Are you *kidding* me? You guys took forever to get here!”

“Now, now.” Heimdall stepped in. “You were a moving target, weren’t you? We got into the tunnel at Bridal Veil Falls just fine! But then the whole moving-to-Loki’s-lair thing—that caught us off guard. We were sealed in at

both ends with earth-giant-hardened stone. Digging after you...well, even with three gods, that was tough.”

*Especially when one takes pictures and does not help,* Vidar signed.

The other two gods ignored him, but Hearthstone signed back: *They never listen, do they?*

*I know,* signed the god. *Hearing people. Silly.*

I decided I liked Vidar. “Excuse me,” I asked him, signing as I spoke. “Are you the god of shoes? Or healing? Or...?”

Vidar smirked. He crooked both of his index fingers. He placed one under his eye, then tapped that finger with the other hooked one. I hadn’t seen that sign before, but I got it: *Eye for an eye. Talons and hooks.* “You’re the god of vengeance.”

That seemed odd to me, since he seemed so kind and was mute. Then again, he wore an expanding shoe that could stomp giant kings flat.

“Oh, Vidar is our go-to guy for emergencies!” Heimdall said. “That shoe of his is made from every shoe scrap that has ever been thrown away! It can...well, you saw what it can do. Hey, do you think we can get a group shot with everyone?”

“No,” said everyone.

Thor glared at the bridge guardian. “Vidar is also called the Silent One, which means he doesn’t talk. He also doesn’t take selfies constantly, which makes him *good company.*”

Mallory Keen sheathed her twin knives. “Well, that’s fascinating, I’m sure. But shouldn’t you Aesir be doing something productive now, like...oh, finding Loki and tying him up again?”

*The girl is right,* Vidar signed. *Time is wasting.*

“Listen to brave Vidar, girl,” said Thor. “Loki’s capture can wait for another day. Right now we should be celebrating the return of my hammer!”

*That’s not what I said,* Vidar signed.

“Besides,” Thor added, “I don’t need to search for the scoundrel. I know exactly where he’s going.”

“You do?” I asked. “Where?”

Thor pounded me on the back—fortunately with his hand and not his hammer. “We’ll talk all about it back at Valhalla. Dinner is on me!”



## FIFTY-FOUR

# Squirrels in the Window May Be Larger Than They Appear

I LOVE IT when gods offer to pay for a dinner that's already free.

Almost as much as I love assault squads that show up after the assault.

I never got the chance to complain about it, though. Once we got back to Valhalla—thanks to Thor's very overcrowded chariot—we were given a celebration feast that was wild even by Viking standards. Thor paraded around the feast hall holding Mjolnir above his head, grinning and yelling “Death to our enemies!” and generally causing a commotion. Party horns were blown. Mead was guzzled. Piñatas were cracked open with the mighty Mjolnir and candy was eaten.

Only our little group sulked, clustered around our table and halfheartedly accepting the pats on the back and compliments from our fellow einherjar. They assured us we were heroes. Not only had we retrieved Thor's hammer, we had destroyed an entire wedding party of evil, badly-dressed earth giants!

Nobody complained about Blitz and Hearth's presence. Nobody paid much attention to our new friend Vidar, despite his strange footwear. The Silent One lived up to his name and sat with us silently, occasionally asking Hearthstone questions in a form of sign language I didn't recognize.

Heimdall left early to get back to the Bifrost Bridge. There were important selfies to be taken. Meanwhile, Thor partied like a madman, bodysurfing over crowds of einherjar and Valkyries. Whatever he had

wanted to tell us about Loki's location, he seemed to have forgotten, and I wasn't going to get anywhere near him in that mob.

My only consolation: some of the lords at the thanes' table also looked uneasy. Every once in a while Helgi the manager would scowl at the crowd as if he wanted to scream what I was thinking: *STOP CELEBRATING, YOU IDIOTS! LOKI IS FREE!*

Maybe the einherjar were choosing not to worry about it. Maybe Thor had assured them, too, that it was a problem easily fixed. Or maybe they were celebrating *because* Ragnarok was near. That idea scared me the most.

As dinner ended, Thor rode off in his chariot without even acknowledging us. He bellowed to the assembled host that he had to hurry to the borders of Midgard and demonstrate his hammer's power by blasting some giant armies to sizzly bits. The einherjar cheered and then began streaming out of the feast hall, no doubt heading to smaller but even wilder parties.

Vidar said his good-byes after a short conversation with Hearthstone in that strange language. Whatever he said, the elf chose not to share it with us. My hallmates offered to stay with me, but they had been invited to an after-party after-party, and I told them to go. They deserved some fun after the tedium of digging their way into Loki's cavern.

Sam, Alex, Blitz, and Hearth accompanied me to the elevators. Before we got there, Helgi appeared and grabbed my arm.

"You and your friends need to come with me."

The manager's voice was grim. I got the feeling we would not be receiving trophies and coupons for our brave deeds.

Helgi led us through passageways I'd never seen before, up staircases into the far reaches of the hotel. I knew Valhalla was big, but each time I went exploring, I was newly amazed. The place went on forever—like Costco or a chemistry lecture.

At last we arrived at a heavy oaken door with a brass plaque that read MANAGER.

Helgi pushed open the door and we followed him inside to an office.

Three of the walls and the ceiling were paneled in spears—polished oak shafts tipped with gleaming silver points. Behind Helgi's desk, the back wall was one huge plate glass window overlooking the endless swaying branches of the World Tree.

I'd seen a lot of different views from the windows of Valhalla. The hotel had access to each of the Nine Worlds. But I'd never seen a view straight into the tree. It made me feel disoriented, like we were floating in its branches—which, cosmically speaking, we were.

"Sit." Helgi waved to a semicircle of chairs on the visitors' side of the desk. Sam, Alex, Blitz, Hearth, and I got comfortable with lots of squeaking leather and creaking wood. Helgi plopped himself down behind his huge mahogany desk, which was empty except for one of those desk-toy thingies with the hanging silver ball bearings that you can knock back and forth.

Oh...and the ravens. At either front corner of the desk perched one of Odin's twin ravens, both of them glaring at me as if trying to decide whether to assign me detention or feed me to the trolls.

Helgi leaned back and steepled his fingers. He would've looked intimidating if it weren't for his roadkill explosion of hair and the leftover bits of feast beast in his beard.

Sam fiddled nervously with her ring of keys. "Sir, what happened in Loki's cave...it wasn't my friends' fault. I take full responsibility—"

"The Helheim you do!" Alex snapped. "Sam did nothing wrong. If you're going to punish anyone—"

"Stop!" Helgi ordered. "No one is getting punished."

Blitzen exhaled with relief. "Well, that's good. Because we didn't have time to return this to Thor, but honestly we meant to." Hearthstone produced Thor's two-by-four hall-pass key and set it on the manager's desk.

Helgi frowned. He slipped the pass into his desk drawer, which made me wonder how many others he had in there.

"You are here," said the manager, "because Odin's ravens asked for you."

"Huginn and Muninn?" *Thought and Memory*, I recalled from the *Hotel Valhalla Guide*.

The birds made that weird croaking noise ravens love to make, as if regurgitating the souls of all the frogs they'd eaten over the centuries.

They were much larger than normal ravens—and creepier. Their eyes were like gateways into the void. Their feathers were a thousand different shades of ebony. When the light hit them, runes seemed to glisten in their plumage—dark words rising out of a sea of black ink.

Helgi tapped his desk toy. The balls started swinging and hitting each other with an annoying *click, click, click*.

“Odin would be here,” said the manager, “but he is tending to other matters. Huginn and Muninn represent him. As a bonus”—Helgi leaned forward and lowered his voice—“the ravens don’t show motivational PowerPoints.”

The birds squawked in agreement.

“Now, down to business,” Helgi said. “Loki has escaped, but we know where he is. Samirah al-Abbas...your next mission as Odin’s Valkyrie in charge of special operations will be to find your father and put him back in chains.”

Samirah lowered her head. She didn’t look surprised—more like she’d lost the final appeal for a death sentence she’d been fighting her entire life.

“Sir,” she said, “I will do as I’m ordered. But after what happened the last two times I faced my father, the ease with which he controlled me—”

“You can learn to fight it,” Alex interrupted. “I can help—”

“I’m not you, Alex! I can’t...” Sam gestured vaguely at her sister, as if to indicate all the things Alex was that Sam could never be.

Helgi brushed some food scraps out of his beard. “Samirah, I didn’t say it would be easy. But the ravens say you can do it. You must do it. And so you shall.”

Sam stared at the ball bearings bouncing back and forth. *Click, click, click.*

“This place where my father went...” she said. “Where is it?”

“The Eastern Shores,” Helgi said. “Just as the old stories say. Now that Loki is free, he has gone to the docks, where he hopes to complete construction of *Naglfar*.”

Hearthstone signed: *The Ship of Nails. That is not good.*

I felt cold...and seasick.

I remembered visiting that ship in a dream, standing on the deck of a Viking longboat the size of an aircraft carrier and made entirely from the toenails and fingernails of the dead. Loki had warned me that when Ragnarok began, he would sail the ship to Asgard, destroy the gods, steal their Pop-Tarts, and otherwise cause mass chaos.

“If Loki is free, is it already too late?” I asked. “Isn’t his unbinding one of the things that signals the beginning of Ragnarok?”

“Yes and no,” Helgi said.

I waited. “Am I supposed to pick one?”

“The unbinding of Loki *does* help start Ragnarok,” Helgi said. “But nothing says *this* escape is his last and final escape. It’s conceivable you could recapture him and put him back, thus postponing Doomsday.”

“Like we did with Fenris Wolf,” Blitz muttered. “That was a piece of cake.”

“Exactly.” Helgi nodded enthusiastically. “Cake.”

“I was being sarcastic,” Blitz said. “I suppose they don’t have sarcasm in Valhalla any more than they have decent barbers.”

Helgi reddened. “See here, dwarf—”

He was interrupted by a huge brown-and-orange shape slamming into his window.

Blitzen fell out of his chair. Alex leaped straight up and clung to the ceiling in the form of a sugar glider. Sam rose with her ax in hand, ready for battle. I valiantly took cover down in front of Helgi’s desk. Hearthstone just sat there, frowning at the giant squirrel.

Why? he signed.

“It’s all right, everyone,” Helgi assured us. “It’s just Ratatosk.”

The words *just Ratatosk* did not compute. I’d been chased through the World Tree by that monstrous rodent. I’d heard his soul-searing, scolding voice. It was *never* all right when he showed up.

“No, really,” Helgi insisted. “The window is soundproof and squirrel-proof. The beast just likes to stop by and taunt me sometimes.”

I peeked over the top of the desk. Ratatosk was barking and screeching, but only the faintest murmur came through the glass. He gnashed his teeth at us and pressed his cheek against the window.

The ravens didn’t seem bothered. They glanced over as if to say, *Oh, it’s you*, then went back to preening their feathers.

“How do you stand it?” Blitzen asked. “That—that thing is deadly!”

The squirrel puffed his mouth against the glass, showing us his teeth and gums, then licked the window.

“I’d rather know where he is than not,” Helgi said. “Sometimes I can tell what’s going on in the Nine Worlds just by observing the squirrel’s level of agitation.”

Judging from Ratatosk’s current state, I guessed some serious stuff was going down in the Nine Worlds. To alleviate our anxiety, Helgi rose, lowered the blinds, and sat back down.

“Where were we?” he said. “Ah, yes, cake and sarcasm.”

Alex dropped from the ceiling and returned to her regular form. She'd changed out of her wedding dress earlier and was back in her old diamond-pattern sweater-vest. She tugged at it casually as if to say, *Yes, I totally meant to turn into a sugar glider.*

Sam lowered her ax. "Helgi, about this mission...I wouldn't know where to start. Where the ship is docked? The Eastern Shores could be on any world."

The manager turned up his palms. "I don't have those answers, Samirah, but Huginn and Muninn will brief you privately. Go with them to the high places of Valhalla. Let them show you thoughts and memories."

To me, that sounded like some trippy vision quest with Darth Vader appearing in a foggy cave.

Sam didn't look too happy about it, either. "But, Helgi—"

"There can be no debate," the manager insisted. "Odin chose you. He has chosen this entire group because—" He paused abruptly and put a finger to his ear. I'd never realized Helgi wore an earpiece, but he was obviously listening to something.

He glanced up at us. "Apologies. Where was I? Ah, yes, all five of you were present when Loki escaped. Therefore, all five of you will have a part to play in recapturing the outlaw god."

"We broke it, we bought it," I muttered.

"Exactly!" Helgi grinned. "Now that that's settled, you'll have to excuse me. There's been a massacre in the yoga studio, and they need clean mats."



## FIFTY-FIVE

### Daisies in the Shape of an Elf

AS SOON AS we left the office, the ravens led Sam up another staircase. She glanced back at us uneasily, but Helgi had been pretty clear that the rest of us weren't invited.

Alex turned on her heel and marched off in the opposite direction.

"Hey," I called. "Where—?"

She looked back, her eyes so angry I couldn't finish my question.

"Later, Magnus," she said. "I have to..." She made a strangling gesture with her hands. "Just later."

That left me with Blitzen and Hearthstone, who were both swaying on their feet.

"You guys want to—?"

"Sleep," Blitzen said. "Please. Immediately."

I led them back to my room. The three of us camped in the grass in the middle of my atrium. It reminded me of the old days, sleeping in the Public Garden, but I'm not going to tell you I was nostalgic for being homeless. Homelessness is not something any sane person would ever be nostalgic about. Still, like I've said, it was a lot simpler than being an undead warrior who chased fugitive gods across the Nine Worlds and conducted serious conversations while a monstrous squirrel made faces at you in the window.

Hearthstone conked out first. He curled up, sighed gently, and went right to sleep. When he was still, despite his black clothes, he seemed to blend

into the shadows of the grass. Maybe it was elf camouflage—a remnant of the time when they were one with nature.

Blitz wedged his back against a tree and stared at Hearth with concern.

“We’re going to Blitzen’s Best tomorrow,” he told me. “Reopen the shop. Spend a few weeks trying to regroup and get back to...whatever *normal* is. Before we have to go and find...” The prospect of taking on Loki again was so daunting he couldn’t even finish the thought.

I felt guilty that I hadn’t considered Hearthstone’s grief the past few days. I’d been too preoccupied with Thor’s stupid TV hammer.

“That’s a good idea,” I said. “Alfheim was rough for him.”

Blitz clasped his hands near where the Skofnung Sword had pierced him. “Yeah, I’m worried about Hearth’s unfinished business there.”

“I wish I’d been more help to him,” I said. “To both of you.”

“Nah, kid. Some kinds of help you have to do for yourself. Hearth...he’s got a dad-shaped hole in his heart. You can’t do anything about that.”

“His dad will never be a nice guy.”

“No kidding. But Hearth has to come to terms with that. Sooner or later, he’ll have to go back and face him...get his inheritance rune back one way or another. When and how that will happen, though...” He shrugged helplessly.

I thought about my Uncle Randolph. How did you decide when someone was irretrievably lost—when they were so evil or toxic or just plain set in their ways that you had to face the fact they were never going to change? How long could you keep trying to save them, and when did you give up and grieve for them as though they were dead?

It was easy for me to advise Hearthstone on his father. The dude was way past horrible. But my own uncle, who had gotten me killed, stabbed my friend, and freed the god of evil...I still couldn’t quite bring myself to write him off.

Blitzen patted my hand. “Whatever happens, kid, we’ll be ready when you need us. We’ll see this through and get Loki back in chains, even if I have to make those chains myself.”

“Yours would be a lot more fashionable,” I said.

Blitz’s mouth twitched. “Yeah. Yeah, they would. And don’t feel guilty, kid. You did good.”

I wasn’t so sure about that. What had I accomplished? I felt like I’d spent the last six days scrambling around doing damage control, trying to keep my

friends alive, trying to minimize the fallout from Loki's plot.

I imagined what Samirah would say: *That's enough, Magnus.* She'd probably point out that I'd helped Amir. I'd managed to heal Blitzen. I'd gotten Thor's assault team into the giants' lair to retrieve the hammer. I'd bowled a really mean game of doubles with my partner the African bush elephant.

Still...Loki was free. He'd hurt Sam. He'd crushed her confidence *badly*. And then there was that little thing about all the Nine Worlds now at risk of being thrown into chaos.

"I feel terrible, Blitz," I admitted. "The more I train, the more powers I learn...It just seems like the problems get ten times bigger than what I can handle. Is that ever going to stop?"

Blitz didn't answer. His chin rested on his chest. He was quietly snoring.

I put a blanket over him. I sat for a long time watching the stars through the tree branches and thinking about holes in people's hearts.

I wondered what Loki was doing right now. If I were him, I would be planning the most massive revenge spree the Nine Worlds had ever seen. Maybe that's why Vidar, the god of vengeance, had seemed so gentle and quiet. He knew it didn't take much to start a chain reaction of violence and death. One insult. One theft. One severed chain. Thrym and Thrynga had nursed a grudge for generations. They'd been used by Loki not just once, but twice. And now they were dead.

I don't remember falling asleep. When I woke the next morning, Blitz and Hearth were gone. A bed of daisies bloomed where Hearthstone had slept—maybe it was his way of saying *good-bye, thank you, see you soon.* I still felt depressed.

I showered and got dressed. Just brushing my teeth felt ridiculously normal after the last few days. I was about to head to breakfast when I noticed a note slipped under my door, in Samirah's elegant cursive:

*Some ideas. Thinking Cup? I'll be there all morning.*

I stepped into the hallway. I liked the idea of getting out of Valhalla for a little while. I wanted to talk to Sam. I wanted good mortal coffee. I wanted to sit in the sunshine and eat a poppy seed muffin and pretend that I wasn't an einherji with a fugitive god to catch.

Then I looked across the hall.

First I needed to do one more difficult and dangerous thing. I needed to check on Alex Fierro.

Alex opened the door and greeted me with a cheerful “Get lost.”

Wet clay spackled Alex’s face and hands. I glanced inside and saw the project sitting on the potter’s wheel. “Dude...”

I stepped inside. For some reason, Alex let me.

All the shattered pottery had been cleaned up. The racks were filled with new pots and cups, just drying and still unglazed. On the wheel stood a huge vase, about three feet tall, shaped like a trophy.

I grinned. “For Sif?”

Alex shrugged. “Yeah. If it turns out okay.”

“Is this gift ironic, or serious?”

“You’re going to make me choose? I dunno. It just...felt right to do. At first I hated her. She reminded me of my stepmother, all fussy and uptight. But...maybe I should cut her some slack.”

Over on the bed lay the gold-and-white wedding dress, still spattered with blood, the hem caked in dust and spotted with acid stains. Nevertheless, Alex had smoothed it out very carefully, like it was something worth keeping.

“Ahem. Magnus, you had some reason to stop by?”

“Yeah...” I found it hard to concentrate. I stared at the rows of pots, all perfectly shaped. “You made all these last night?”

I picked one up.

Alex took it out of my hands. “No, you can’t touch it, Magnus. Thanks for asking, Magnus. Yes, most of these were last night. I couldn’t sleep. The pottery...it makes me feel better. Now you were about to say why you came over and then quickly get out of my hair?”

“I’m going to meet Sam in Boston. I thought—”

“That I’d want to come with? No, thanks. When Sam is ready to talk, she knows where to find me.”

Alex marched back to the wheel, picked up a scraper, and started smoothing the sides of the trophy cup.

“You’re angry with her.”

Alex kept scraping.

“That’s a pretty impressive vase,” I offered. “I don’t know how you can shape something that large without it falling apart. I tried to use a wheel in,

like, fifth grade art class. The best I could manage was an off-center lump.”

“A self-portrait, then?”

“Ha, ha. Just saying I wish I could do something this cool.”

No immediate reply. Maybe because I hadn’t left much room for a witty insult.

Finally, Alex glanced up warily. “You heal people, Magnus. Your dad is actually a *helpful* god. You’ve got this whole...sunshiny, warm, friendly thing going on. That’s not enough cool stuff for you?”

“I’ve never been called *sunshiny* before.”

“Oh, please. You pretend like you’re all tough and sarcastic or whatever, but you’re a big softie. And to answer your question, yes, I’m mad at Sam. Unless she changes her attitude, I’m not sure I can teach her.”

“To...resist Loki.”

Alex picked up a lump of clay and squeezed it. “The secret is, you have to be *comfortable* changing. All the time. You have to make Loki’s power *your* power.”

“Like your tattoo.”

Alex shrugged. “Clay can be shaped and reshaped, over and over, but if it gets too dry, if it sets...then there’s only so much you can do with it. When it gets to that point, you’d better be sure it’s in the shape you want it to have forever.”

“You’re saying Sam can’t change.”

“I don’t know if she can, or even if she wants to. But I do know this: if she won’t let me teach her how I resist Loki, if she won’t at least try—then the next time we face him, we’re all dead.”

I took a shaky breath. “Okay, good pep talk. I guess I’ll see you at dinner tonight.”

When I got to the door, Alex said, “How did you know?”

I turned. “Know what?”

“When you walked in, you said *dude*. How did you know I was male?”

I thought about it. At first I wondered if it had just been a throwaway comment—a non-gender-specific *dude*. The more I considered, though, the more I realized I’d genuinely picked up on the fact that Alex was male. Or rather, Alex *had* been male. Now, after we’d been talking for a few minutes, she definitely seemed like a she. But how I’d sensed that, I had no idea.

“Just my perceptive nature, I guess.”

Alex snorted. “Right.”

“But you’re a girl now.”

She hesitated. “Yeah.”

“Interesting.”

“You can leave now.”

“Will you make me a trophy for my perceptiveness?”

She picked up a pottery shard and threw it at me.

I closed the door just as it shattered on the inside.



## FIFTY-SIX

# Let's Try This Whole "Meeting for Coffee" Thing Again

JUDGING FROM the line of empty cups, Sam was on her third espresso.

The idea of approaching an armed Valkyrie with three espressos in her system was usually not advisable, but I walked up slowly and sat across from her. She didn't look at me. Her attention was on the two raven feathers in front of her. It was a windy morning. Sam's green hijab rippled around her face like waves on a beach, but the two raven feathers didn't flutter.

"Hey," she said.

It was a lot friendlier than *get lost*. Sam was so different from Alex, but there was something similar in their eyes—a sense of urgency churning just below the surface. It wasn't easy thinking about Loki's inheritance battling inside my two friends, trying to take control.

"You got feathers," I noted.

She touched the one of the left. "A memory. And this one"—she tapped the right—"a thought. The ravens don't really speak. They stare at you and let you stroke their plumage until the right feathers drop out."

"So what do they mean?"

"This one, the memory..." Sam ran a finger down the barbs. "It's ancestral. From my distant forefather, Ahmad Ibn Fadlan Ibn al-Abbas."

"The guy who traveled among the Vikings."

Sam nodded. "When I took the feather, I could see his journey like I was there. I learned a lot of things he never wrote about—things he didn't think

would go over well in the court of the caliph of Baghdad.”

“He saw Norse gods?” I guessed. “Valkyries? Giants?”

“And more. He also heard legends about the ship *Naglfar*. The place where it’s docked, the Eastern Shores, lies on the border between Jotunheim and Niflheim—the wildest, most remote part of either world. It’s completely inaccessible, locked in ice except for one day of the year—Midsummer.”

“So that’s when Loki will plan to set sail.”

“And that’s when we’ll have to be there to stop him.”

I craved an espresso, but my heart was racing so fast I doubted I needed one. “So what now? We just wait until summer?”

“It’s going to take time to find his location. And before we can leave, we’ll need to prepare, train, make sure we can beat him.”

I remembered what Alex had said: *I’m not sure I can teach her.*

“We’ll make it happen.” I tried to sound confident. “What did the second feather tell you?”

“That’s a thought,” Samirah said. “A plan to move forward. To reach the Eastern Shores, we’ll need to sail through the farthest branches of the World Tree, through the old Viking lands. That’s where giant magic is strongest, and where we’ll find the sea passage to *Naglfar*’s dock.”

“The old Viking lands.” My fingers tingled. I wasn’t sure whether it was with excitement or fear. “Scandinavia? I’m pretty sure there are flights from Logan.”

Sam shook her head. “We’ll have to go by sea, Magnus. The way the Vikings came *here*. Just as you can only enter Alfheim through the air, we can only reach the wild borderlands of the Eastern Shores through salt water and ice.”

“Right,” I said. “Because nothing is ever easy.”

“No, it’s not.”

Her tone was distracted, wistful. It made me realize I was being kind of insensitive. Sam had a lot of other problems going on besides her evil father.

“How’s Amir?” I asked.

She actually smiled. In the wind, her hijab seemed to shape-shift from waves to grassy fields to smooth glass.

“He’s very good,” she said. “He accepts me. He doesn’t want to cancel our engagement. You were right, Magnus. He’s a lot stronger than I gave him credit for.”

“That’s great. What about your grandparents, and his dad?”

Samirah laughed drily. “Well, we can’t have everything. They remember nothing about Loki’s visits. They know that Amir and I have made up. For now, all is well. I’m back to making excuses about why I have to rush off in the middle of class or after school. I’m doing a lot of ‘tutoring.’” She put the word in air quotes.

I remembered how weary she’d looked when I met her here six days ago. If anything, she looked more tired now.

“Something’s got to give, Sam,” I told her. “You’re running yourself ragged.”

“I know.” She put her hand over the feather of thought. “I’ve promised Amir—once we recapture Loki, once I am sure that Ragnarok has been averted, at least for the present, then I’m done.”

“Done?”

“I’m retiring from the Valkyries. I’ll devote myself to college, completing my pilot’s training, and...marriage, of course. When I’m eighteen, as we’ve planned.”

She was blushing like...well, like a bride.

I tried to ignore the hollow feeling in my chest. “And that’s what you want?”

“It’s entirely my choice. Amir supports it.”

“Valkyries can resign?”

“Of course. It’s not like being...ah...”

An *einherji*, she meant. I was one of the reborn. I could travel the worlds. I had amazing strength and stamina. But I would never again be a normal human. I would stay as I was, the same age forever—or until Ragnarok, whichever came first. (Certain restrictions may apply. Read your service agreement for full details.)

“Magnus, I know I brought you into this weird afterlife,” she said. “It’s not fair of me to leave you, but—”

“Hey.” I touched her hand just briefly. I knew that wasn’t Sam’s thing, but she and my cousin Annabeth were the closest thing I would ever have to sisters. “Samirah, I just want you to be happy. And, you know, if we can keep the Nine Worlds from burning before you leave, that would be nice, too.”

She laughed. “All right, then, Magnus. It’s a deal. We’ll need a ship. We’ll need a lot of things, actually.”

“Yeah.” Salt and ice seemed to be making themselves at home in my throat already. I remembered our encounter in January with the sea goddess Ran—how she’d warned me that I would be in trouble if I ever tried to sail the seas again.

“First we need advice,” I said. “About sailing across magical waters, fighting weird sea monsters, and not dying at the hands of a bunch of angry aquatic gods. Strangely enough, I know just the person to talk to.”

“Your cousin,” Sam guessed.

“Yeah,” I said. “Annabeth.”



## FIFTY-SEVEN

### I Call In Some Favors

TEXTING AND calling didn't work, so I sent a raven.

When I told T.J. that I was having trouble getting in touch with my cousin, he looked at me like I was dense. "Just send a bird, Magnus."

Stupid me, I'd spent months in Valhalla not realizing I could rent a raven, tie a message to its leg, and send it to find anybody in the Nine Worlds. The whole thing seemed a little too *Game-of-Thrones*-y to me, but whatever. It worked.

The raven came back promptly with Annabeth's reply.

We coordinated train rides and met halfway between Boston and Manhattan, in New London, Connecticut. Annabeth was there before me, standing on the platform in jeans and sandals and a long-sleeved purple shirt with a laurel-wreath design and the letters SPQR: UNR.

She hugged me until my eyeballs bugged out like Thrynga's. "I was so relieved," she said. "I never thought I'd be glad to see a raven at my window, but...Are you okay?"

"Yeah, yeah." I had to suppress a nervous laugh, because *okay* was a stupid word to describe how I felt. Also, it was obvious Annabeth was *not* okay, either. Her gray eyes seemed heavy and weary, less like storm clouds today, and more like fog banks that couldn't quite lift.

"A lot to talk about," I said. "Let's get some lunch."

We got a table on the deck of the Muddy Waters café. I supposed the place was named after the blues musician, but it seemed a little ominous

considering the waters I was getting ready to sail through. Annabeth and I sat in the sunshine, ordered Cokes and cheeseburgers, and watched the sailboats heading out to Long Island Sound.

“It’s been crazy in New York,” Annabeth said. “I thought communications were only down among demigods...I mean *my* kind, the Greek and Roman, but then I realized I hadn’t heard from you, either. I’m sorry that didn’t dawn on me sooner.”

“Wait, why are communications down?”

Annabeth poked at the table with her fork tines. Her blond hair was loose around her shoulders today. She seemed to be growing it out. It caught the sunlight in a way that reminded me of Sif...but I tried to shake that idea. I knew Annabeth would destroy anyone who dared call her a “trophy” anything.

“There’s a crisis happening,” Annabeth said. “A god fell to earth as a human. These evil Roman emperors are back, causing trouble.”

“Oh, so just the usual, then.”

She laughed. “Yeah. Somehow these evil Romans found a way to mess up communication among demigods. Not just the usual magical kinds of talking, but also cell phones, Wi-Fi, you name it. I’m surprised your raven made it to me. I would’ve come up to Boston to check on you sooner, but...” She shrugged helplessly. “I’ve had my hands full.”

“I totally get it,” I said. “I probably shouldn’t be distracting you. You’ve got enough to deal with...”

She reached across the table and squeezed my hand. “Are you kidding? I want to help. What’s going on?”

It felt so good to tell her everything. I remembered how weird it had been the first time we’d compared notes—her with the Greek gods, me with the Norse. We’d both left that day feeling like we’d overcharged our batteries and our brains were melting.

Now, at least, we had some kind of framework to build on. Sure, it was all still ridiculously crazy. If I stopped to think about it too long, I would start giggling like a lunatic. But I could tell Annabeth my problems without worrying that she wouldn’t believe me. It made me realize how much Sam must appreciate being able to be totally truthful with Amir.

I told Annabeth about Loki’s escape and Sam’s idea for tracking him down—about an icy harbor at the farthest borders of Jotunheim and Niflheim (or Scandinavia, whichever came first).

“A boat trip,” she said. “Oh, boy. That brings back painful memories.”

“Yeah. I remembered what you said about sailing to Greece and...yeah.” I didn’t want to bring up all that horrible stuff again. She had cried when she told me about the things that had happened to her during their voyage, especially how she and her boyfriend, Percy, had fallen into some underworld place called Tartarus.

“Look,” I said, “I don’t want to put any pressure on you. I just thought... I don’t know...maybe you’d have some ideas, some pointers.”

A train rumbled through the station. My view of the bay flickered between the rail cars like an old, out-of-alignment reel-to-reel movie.

“You say you have problems with sea gods,” Annabeth said.

“Yeah, Ran...this bag lady with a net. And I guess her husband hates me too now. His name is Aegir.”

Annabeth tapped her forehead. “I need more memory storage for all these names. Okay, I don’t know how this works with multiple sea gods. Are the Norse ones just in the north and Poseidon is in the south, or do they do, like, a time-share program...?”

I remembered an old cartoon with sheepdogs punching time clocks as they came in for different shifts to keep the wolves away from the flocks. I wondered if gods had punch cards like that, or maybe they all worked from home. Could sea gods telecommute?

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “But I’d like to avoid getting all my friends drowned in a tsunami as soon as we leave Boston.”

“But you’ve got some time?”

“Until this summer,” I said. “We can’t leave while the seas are frozen or something.”

“Good. We’ll be done with school by then, finally graduated.”

“I don’t go to school. Oh...you mean we as in you and your boyfriend?”

“Exactly. Assuming he passes his semester and does okay on his standardized tests, assuming these evil Roman emperors don’t kill us all and destroy the world....”

“Yeah. Loki would be seriously ticked off if Roman emperors destroyed the world before he got to start Ragnarok.”

“We should have enough time to help you, at least compare notes, maybe call in some favors.”

“Um, what favors?”

Annabeth smiled. "I don't know the ocean very well, but my boyfriend does. I think it's time you met Percy."



## GLOSSARY

AEGIR—lord of the waves

AESIR—gods of war, close to humans

ALICARL—Norse for *fatso*

ARGR—Norse for *unmanly*

AVENTAIL—a chain mail curtain around the base of a helmet, meant to protect the neck

BARROW—the tomb of a wight

BERSERKER—a Norse warrior frenzied in battle and considered invulnerable

BIFROST—the rainbow bridge leading from Asgard to Midgard

BILSKIRNIR—Bright Crack, Thor and Sif's palace

BINT—Arabic for *daughter*

BRUNNMIGI—a being who urinates into wells

DRAUGR—Norse zombies

EINHERJAR (EINHERJI, sing.)—great heroes who have died with bravery on Earth; soldiers in Odin's eternal army; they train in Valhalla for Ragnarok, when the bravest of them will join Odin against Loki and the giants in the battle at the end of the world

FENRIS WOLF—an invulnerable wolf born of Loki's affair with a giantess; his mighty strength strikes fear even in the gods, who keep him tied to a rock on an island. He is destined to break free on the day of Ragnarok.

FOLKVANGER—the Vanir afterlife for slain heroes, ruled by the goddess Freya

FREY—the god of spring and summer; the sun, the rain, and the harvest; abundance and fertility, growth and vitality. Frey is the twin brother of Freya and, like his sister, is associated with great beauty. He is lord of Alfheim.

FREYA—the goddess of love; twin sister of Frey; ruler of Folkvanger

**FRIGG**—goddess of marriage and motherhood; Odin’s wife and the queen of Asgard; mother of Balder and Hod

**GAMALOST**—old cheese

**GINNUNGAGAP**—the primordial void; a mist that obscures appearances

**GJALLAR**—Heimdall’s horn

**HEIMDALL**—god of vigilance and the guardian of Bifrost, the gateway to Asgard

**HEL**—goddess of the dishonorable dead; born of Loki’s affair with a giantess

**HELHEIM**—the underworld, ruled by Hel and inhabited by those who died in wickedness, old age, or illness

**HUGINN AND MUNINN**—Odin’s ravens, whose names mean *thought* and *memory*, respectively

**HULDER**—a domesticated forest sprite

**HUSVAETTR**—house wight

**JORMUNGAND**—the World Serpent, born of Loki’s affair with a giantess; his body is so long it wraps around the Earth

**JOTUN**—giant

**KENNING**—a Viking nickname

**LINDWORM**—a fearsome dragon the size and length of an eighteen-wheeler, with just two front legs and leathery brown bat-type wings too small for effective flight

**LOKI**—god of mischief, magic, and artifice; the son of two giants; adept at magic and shape-shifting. He is alternately malicious and heroic to the Asgardian gods and to humankind. Because of his role in the death of Balder, Loki was chained by Odin to three giant boulders with a poisonous serpent coiled over his head. The venom of the snake occasionally irritates Loki’s face, and his writhing can cause earthquakes.

**MAGNI AND MODI**—Thor’s favorite sons, fated to survive Ragnarok

**MEINFRETR**—stinkfart

**MIMIR**—an Aesir god who, along with Honir, traded places with Vanir gods Frey and Njord at the end of the war between the Aesir and the Vanir. When the Vanir didn’t like his counsel, they cut off his head and sent it to Odin. Odin placed the head in a magical well, where the water brought it back to life, and Mimir soaked up all the knowledge of the World Tree.

**MJOLNIR**—Thor’s hammer

**MORGEN-GIFU**—*morning gift*; a gift from the groom to the bride, given on the morning after a marriage is consummated. It belongs to the bride, but it is

held in trust by the groom's family.

MUNDR—*bride-price*; a gift from the groom to the father of the bride

MUSPELL—fire

NAGLFAR—the Ship of Nails

NØKK—a nixie, or water spirit

NORNS—three sisters who control the destinies of both gods and humans

ODIN—the “All-Father” and king of the gods; the god of war and death, but also poetry and wisdom. By trading one eye for a drink from the Well of Wisdom, Odin gained unparalleled knowledge. He has the ability to observe all the Nine Worlds from his throne in Asgard; in addition to his great hall, he also resides in Valhalla with the bravest of those slain in battle.

OSTARA—the first day of spring

OTHALA—inheritance

RAGNAROK—the Day of Doom or Judgment, when the bravest of the einherjar will join Odin against Loki and the giants in the battle at the end of the world

RAN—goddess of the sea; wife of Aegir

RATATOSK—an invulnerable squirrel that constantly runs up and down the World Tree carrying insults between the eagle that lives at the top and Nidhogg, a dragon that lives at the roots

RED GOLD—the currency of Asgard and Valhalla

SAEHRIMNIR—the magical beast of Valhalla; every day it is killed and cooked for dinner, and every morning it is resurrected; it tastes like whatever the diner wants

SIF—goddess of the earth; mother of Uller by her first husband; Thor is her second husband; the rowan is her sacred tree

SLEIPNIR—Odin's eight-legged steed; only Odin can summon him; one of Loki's children

SUMARBRANDER—the Sword of Summer

THANE—a lord of Valhalla

THINGVELLIR—field of the assembly

THOR—god of thunder; son of Odin. Thunderstorms are the earthly effects of Thor's mighty chariot rides across the sky, and lightning is caused by hurling his great hammer, Mjolnir.

THRYM—king of the jotun

TREE OF LAERADR—a tree in the center of the Feast Hall of the Slain in Valhalla containing immortal animals that have particular jobs

TYR—god of courage, law, and trial by combat; he lost a hand to Fenris's bite when the Wolf was restrained by the gods

ULLER—the god of snowshoes and archery

URNES—a symbol of two entwined snakes, which signifies change and flexibility; sometimes a symbol for Loki

UTGARD-LOKI—the most powerful sorcerer of Jotunheim; king of the mountain giants

VALA—a seer

VALHALLA—paradise for warriors in the service of Odin

VALKYRIE—Odin's handmaidens, who choose slain heroes to bring to Valhalla

VANIR—gods of nature; close to elves

VIDAR—the god of vengeance; also called the Silent One

WERGILD—blood debt

WIGHT—a powerful undead creature who likes to collect weapons

YGGDRASIL—the World Tree

ZUHR—Arabic for midday prayer



## PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

AEGIR	<i>AY-gear</i>
AESIR	<i>AY-ser</i>
ALF SEIDR	<i>ALF SAY-der</i>
ALFHEIM	<i>ALF-haym</i>
ALICARL	<i>AL-ih-carrl</i>
ARGR	<i>ARR-ger</i>
ASGARD	<i>AZ-gahrrd</i>
BIFROST	<i>BEE-frrohst</i>
BILSKIRNIR	<i>BEEL-skeerr-neer</i>
DAGAZ	<i>DAH-gahz</i>
DRAUGR	<i>DRAW-ger</i>
EINHERJAR/EINHERJI	<i>in-HAIRR-yar/in-HAIRR-yee</i>
EHWAZ	<i>AY-wahz</i>
FEHU	<i>FAY-hoo</i>
FENRIS	<i>FEHN-rrihss</i>
FOLKVANGER	<i>FOHK-vahn-ger</i>
FREY	<i>FRRAY</i>
FREYA	<i>FRRAY-uh</i>
FRIGG	<i>FRRIHG</i>
GAMALOST	<i>GA-ma-lohst</i>
GEBO	<i>GIH-bo</i>
GEIRROD	<i>GAR-rod</i>

GERD	<i>GAIRRD</i>
GINNUNGAGAP	<i>GEENG-un-guh-gahp</i>
GJALLAR	<i>gee-YALL-ar</i>
HAGALAZ	<i>HA-ga-lahts</i>
HEIMDALL	<i>HAME-doll</i>
HEL	<i>HEHL</i>
HELGI	<i>HEL-ghee</i>
HELHEIM	<i>HEHL-haym</i>
HUGINN	<i>HOO-gihn</i>
HULDER	<i>HOOL-dihrl</i>
HUNDING	<i>HOON-deeng</i>
HUSVAETTR	<i>HOOS-veht-tr</i>
ISA	<i>EES-ah</i>
JORMUNGAND	<i>YOHRR-mun-gand</i>
JOTUN	<i>YOH-toon</i>
JOTUNHEIM	<i>YOH-tuhn-haym</i>
LAERADR	<i>LAY-rrah-dur</i>
KENNING	<i>KEN-ning</i>
LINDWORM	<i>LIHND-wohrrm</i>
LOKI	<i>LOH-kee</i>
MEINFRETR	<i>MAYN-frih-ter</i>
MIDGARD	<i>MIHD-gahrrd</i>
MIMIR	<i>MEE-meer</i>
MJOLNIR	<i>MEE’OHL-neer</i>
MODI	<i>MOH-dee</i>
MORGEN-gifu	<i>MORR-ghen-GIH-foo</i>
MUNDR	<i>MOON-der</i>
MUNINN	<i>MOON-in</i>
MUSPELL	<i>MOO-spel</i>
MUSPELLHEIM	<i>MOOS-pehl-haym</i>
NAGLFAR	<i>NAHG ’L-fahr</i>
NIDAVELLIR	<i>Nee-duh-vehl-EER</i>

NIDHOGG	<i>NEED-hawg</i>
NIFLHEIM	<i>NIHF-uh-haym</i>
NØKK	<i>NAWK</i>
NORNS	<i>NOHRRNZ</i>
NORUMBEGA	<i>nohrr-uhm-BAY-guh</i>
ODIN	<i>OH-dihn</i>
OSTARA	<i>OH-starr-ah</i>
OTHALA	<i>OH-thal-ah</i>
PERTHRO	<i>PERR-thrroh</i>
RAGNAROK	<i>RAG-nuh-rrawk</i>
RAN	<i>RAN</i>
RATATOSK	<i>RAT-uh-tawsk</i>
SAEHRIMNIR	<i>SAY-h’rihm-neer</i>
SAMIRAH AL-ABBAS	<i>sah-MEER-ah ahl-AH-bahss</i>
SIF	<i>SEEV</i>
SLEIPNIR	<i>SLAYP-neer</i>
SUMARBRANDER	<i>SOO-marr-brrand-der</i>
THINGVELLIR	<i>THING-vih-leer</i>
THURISAZ	<i>THOORR-ee-sahts</i>
THOR	<i>THORE</i>
THRYM	<i>THRRIMM</i>
THRYNGA	<i>THRRIN-gah</i>
TIWAZ	<i>TEE-vahz</i>
TYR	<i>TEAR</i>
ULLER	<i>OO-lir</i>
URNES	<i>OORR-nis</i>
URUZ	<i>OOR-oots</i>
UTGARD-Loki	<i>OOT-gahrrd-LOH-kee</i>
VALA	<i>VAL-uh</i>
VALHALLA	<i>Val-HAHL-uh</i>
VALKYRIE	<i>VAL-kerr-ee</i>
VANAHEIM	<i>VAN-uh-haym</i>

VANIR	<i>Vah-NEER</i>
VIDAR	<i>VEE-dar</i>
WERGILD	<i>WIR-gild</i>
WIGHT	<i>WHITE</i>
YGGDRASIL	<i>IHG-druh-sihl</i>

## THE NINE WORLDS

ASGARD—the home of the Aesir

VANAHEIM—the home of the Vanir

ALFHEIM—the home of the light elves

MIDGARD—the home of humans

JOTUNHEIM—the home of the giants

NIDAVELLIR—the home of the dwarves

NIFLHEIM—the world of ice, fog, and mist

MUSPELLHEIM—the home of the fire giants and demons

HELHEIM—the home of Hel and the dishonorable dead

## RUNES (IN ORDER OF MENTION)

FEHU—the rune of Frey



OTHALA—inheritance



DAGAZ—new beginnings, transformations



URUZ—ox



GEBO—gift



PERTHRO—the empty cup



THURISAZ—the rune of Thor

Þ

HAGALAZ—hail

N

EHWAZ—horse, transportation

M

ISA—ice

I

RICK RIORDAN

**MAGNUS  
CHASE**

and the GODS of ASGARD



THE SHIP OF THE DEAD

Disney • HYPERION  
*Los Angeles New York*

*To Philip José Farmer,  
whose Riverworld books kick-started my love of  
history*



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## Percy Jackson Does His Level Best to Kill Me

“TRY IT AGAIN,” Percy told me. “This time with less dying.”

Standing on the yardarm of the USS *Constitution*, looking down at Boston Harbor two hundred feet below, I wished I had the natural defenses of a turkey buzzard. Then I could projectile vomit on Percy Jackson and make him go away.

The last time he’d made me try this jump, only an hour before, I’d broken every bone in my body. My friend Alex Fierro had rushed me back to the Hotel Valhalla just in time for me to die in my own bed.

Unfortunately, I was an *einherrji*, one of Odin’s immortal warriors. I couldn’t die permanently as long as I expired within the boundaries of Valhalla. Thirty minutes later, I woke up as good as new. Now here I was again, ready for more pain. Hooray!

“Is this strictly necessary?” I asked.

Percy leaned against the rigging, the wind rippling little waves through his black hair.

He looked like a normal guy—orange T-shirt, jeans, battered white leather Reeboks. If you saw him walking down the street, you wouldn’t think, *Hey, look, a demigod son of Poseidon! Praise the Olympians!* He didn’t have gills or webbed fingers, though his eyes were sea green—about the same shade I imagined my face was just then. The only strange thing about Jackson was the tattoo on the inside of his forearm—a trident as dark as seared wood, with a single line underneath and the letters SPQR.

He’d told me the letters stood for *Sono Pazzi Quelli Romani—those Romans are crazy*. I wasn’t sure if he was kidding.

“Look, Magnus,” he told me. “You’ll be sailing across hostile territory. A bunch of sea monsters and sea gods and who-knows-what-else will be trying to kill you, right?”

“Yeah, I suppose.”

By which I meant: *Please don’t remind me. Please leave me alone.*

“At some point,” said Percy, “you’re going to get thrown off the boat, maybe from as high up as this. You’ll need to know how to survive the impact, avoid drowning, and get back to the surface ready to fight. That’s going to be tough, especially in cold water.”

I knew he was right. From what my cousin Annabeth had told me, Percy had been through even more dangerous adventures than I had. (And I lived in Valhalla. I died at least once a day.) As much as I appreciated him coming up from New York to offer me heroic aquatic-survival tips, though, I was getting tired of failing.

Yesterday, I’d gotten chomped by a great white shark, strangled by a giant squid, and stung by a thousand irate moon jellies. I’d swallowed several gallons of seawater trying to hold my breath, and learned that I was no better at hand-to-hand combat thirty feet down than I was on dry land.

This morning, Percy had walked me around Old Ironsides, trying to teach me the basics of sailing and navigation, but I still couldn’t tell the mizzenmast from the poop deck.

Now here I was: a failure at falling off a pole.

I glanced down, where Annabeth and Alex Fierro were watching us from the deck.

“You got this, Magnus!” Annabeth cheered.

Alex Fierro gave me two thumbs up. At least I think that was the gesture. It was hard to be sure from this distance.

Percy took a deep breath. He’d been patient with me so far, but I could tell the stress of the weekend was starting to get to him, too. Whenever he looked at me, his left eye twitched.

“It’s cool, man,” he promised. “I’ll demonstrate again, okay? Start in skydiver position, spread-eagle to slow your descent. Then, right before you hit the water, straighten like an arrow—head up, heels down, back straight, butt clenched. That last part is really important.”

“Skydiver,” I said. “Eagle. Arrow. Butt.”

“Right,” Percy said. “Watch me.”

He jumped from the yardarm, falling toward the harbor in perfect spread-eagle form. At the last moment, he straightened, heels downward, and hit the water, disappearing with hardly a ripple. A moment later, he surfaced, his palms raised like *See? Nothing to it!*

Annabeth and Alex applauded.

“Okay, Magnus!” Alex called up to me. “Your turn! Be a man!”

I suppose that was meant to be funny. Most of the time, Alex identified as female, but today he was definitely male. Sometimes I slipped up and used the wrong pronouns for him/her, so Alex liked to return the favor by teasing me mercilessly. Because friendship.

Annabeth hollered, “You got this, cuz!”

Below me, the dark surface of the water glinted like a freshly scrubbed waffle iron, ready to squash me flat.

*Right,* I muttered to myself.

I jumped.

For half a second, I felt pretty confident. The wind whistled past my ears. I spread my arms and managed not to scream.

*Okay,* I thought. *I can do this.*

Which was when my sword, Jack, decided to fly up out of nowhere and start a conversation.

“Hey, *señor!*” His runes glowed along his double-edged blade.

“Whatcha doing?”

I flailed, trying to turn vertical for impact. “Jack, not now!”

“Oh, I get it! You’re falling! You know, one time Frey and I were falling

Before he could continue his fascinating story, I slammed into the water.

Just as Percy had warned, the cold stunned my system. I sank, momentarily paralyzed, the air knocked out of my lungs. My ankles throbbed like I’d bounced off a brick trampoline. But at least I wasn’t dead.

I scanned for major injuries. When you’re an einherji, you get pretty good at listening to your own pain. You can stagger around the battlefield in Valhalla, mortally wounded, gasping your last breath, and calmly think, *Oh, so that’s what a crushed rib cage feels like. Interesting!*

This time I’d broken my left ankle for sure. The right one was only sprained.

Easy fix. I summoned the power of Frey.

Warmth like summer sunlight spread from my chest into my limbs. The pain subsided. I wasn't as good at healing myself as I was at healing others, but I felt my ankles beginning to mend—as if a swarm of friendly wasps were crawling around inside my flesh, mud-daubing the fractures, reknitting the ligaments.

*Ah, better,* I thought, as I floated through the cold darkness. *Now, there's something else I should be doing....Oh, right. Breathing.*

Jack's hilt nudged against my hand like a dog looking for attention. I wrapped my fingers around his leather grip and he hauled me upward, launching me out of the harbor like a rocket-powered Lady of the Lake. I landed, gasping and shivering, on the deck of Old Ironsides next to my friends.

“Whoa.” Percy stepped back. “That was different. You okay, Magnus?”

“Fine,” I coughed out, sounding like a duck with a chest cold.

Percy eyed the glowing runes on my weapon. “Where’d the sword come from?”

“Hi, I’m Jack!” said Jack.

Annabeth stifled a yelp. “It talks?”

“*It?*” Jack demanded. “Hey, lady, some respect. I’m *Sumarbrander!* The Sword of Summer! The weapon of Frey! I’ve been around for thousands of years! Also, I’m a dude!”

Annabeth frowned. “Magnus, when you told me about your magic sword, did you perhaps fail to mention that it—that *he* can speak?”

“Did I?” Honestly I couldn’t remember.

The past few weeks, Jack had been off on his own, doing whatever sentient magic swords did in their free time. Percy and I had been using standard-issue Hotel Valhalla practice blades for sparring. It hadn’t occurred to me that Jack might fly in out of nowhere and introduce himself. Besides, the fact that Jack talked was the *least* weird thing about him. The fact that he could sing the entire cast recording of *Jersey Boys* from memory...*that* was weird.

Alex Fierro looked like he was trying not to laugh. He was wearing pink and green today, as usual, though I’d never seen this particular outfit before: lace-up leather boots, ultra-skinny rose jeans, an untucked lime dress shirt, and a checkered skinny tie as loose as a necklace. With his thick black Ray-Bans and his choppy green hair, he looked like he’d stepped off a New Wave album cover circa 1979.

“Be polite, Magnus,” he said. “Introduce your friends to your sword.”

“Uh, right,” I said. “Jack, this is Percy and Annabeth. They’re demigods—the Greek kind.”

“Hmm.” Jack didn’t sound impressed. “I met Hercules once.”

“Who hasn’t?” Annabeth muttered.

“Fair point,” Jack said. “But I suppose if you’re friends of Magnus’s...” He went completely still. His runes faded. Then he leaped out of my hand and flew toward Annabeth, his blade twitching as if he was sniffing the air. “Where is she? Where are you hiding the babe?”

Annabeth backed toward the rail. “Whoa, there, sword. Personal space!”

“Jack, behave,” Alex said. “What are you doing?”

“She’s around here somewhere,” Jack insisted. He flew to Percy. “Aha! What’s in your pocket, sea boy?”

“Excuse me?” Percy looked a bit nervous about the magical sword hovering at his waistline.

Alex lowered his Ray-Bans. “Okay, now I’m curious. What *do* you have in your pocket, Percy? Inquiring swords want to know.”

Percy pulled a plain-looking ballpoint pen from his jeans. “You mean this?”

“BAM!” Jack said. “Who is this vision of loveliness?”

“Jack,” I said. “It’s a pen.”

“No, it’s not! Show me! Show me!”

“Uh...sure.” Percy uncapped the pen.

Immediately it transformed into a three-foot-long sword with a leaf-shaped blade of glowing bronze. Compared to Jack, the weapon looked delicate, almost petite, but from the way Percy wielded it, I had no doubt he’d be able to hold his own on the battlefields of Valhalla with that thing.

Jack turned his point toward me, his runes flashing burgundy. “See, Magnus? I *told* you it wasn’t stupid to carry a sword disguised as a pen!”

“Jack, I never said that!” I protested. “*You* did.”

Percy raised an eyebrow. “What are you two talking about?”

“Nothing,” I said hastily. “So I guess this is the famous Riptide? Annabeth told me about it.”

“*Her*,” Jack corrected.

Annabeth frowned. “Percy’s sword is a *she*?”

Jack laughed. “Well, *duh*.”

Percy studied Riptide, though I could've told him from experience it was almost impossible to tell a sword's gender by looking at it.

"I don't know," he said. "Are you sure—?"

"Percy," said Alex. "Respect the gender."

"Okay, fine," he said. "It's just kinda strange that I never knew."

"On the other hand," Annabeth said, "you didn't know the pen could write until last year."

"That's low, Wise Girl."

"Anyway!" Jack interrupted. "The important thing is Riptide's here now, she's beautiful, and she's met me! Maybe the two of us can...you know...have some private time to talk about, er, sword stuff?"

Alex smirked. "That sounds like a wonderful idea. How about we let the swords get to know each other while the rest of us have lunch? Magnus, do you think you can handle eating falafel without choking?"



## Falafel Sandwiches with a Side Order of Ragnarok

WE ATE ON the aft spar deck. (Look at me with the nautical terms.)

After a hard morning of failing, I felt like I'd really earned my deep-fried chickpea patties and pita bread, my yogurt and chilled cucumber slices, and my side order of extra-spicy lamb kebabs. Annabeth had arranged our picnic lunch. She knew me too well.

My clothes dried quickly in the sunlight. The warm breeze felt good on my face. Sailboats traced their way across the harbor while airplanes cut across the blue sky, heading out from Logan Airport to New York or California or Europe. The whole city of Boston seemed charged with impatient energy, like a classroom at 2:59 P.M., waiting for the dismissal bell, everybody ready to get out of town for the summer and enjoy the good weather.

Me, all I wanted to do was stay put.

Riptide and Jack stood propped nearby in a coil of rope, their hilts leaning against the gunnery rail. Riptide acted like your typical inanimate object, but Jack kept inching closer, chatting her up, his blade glowing the same dark bronze as hers. Fortunately, Jack was used to holding one-sided conversations. He joked. He flattered. He name-dropped like a maniac.

“You know, *Thor* and *Odin* and I were at this tavern one time...”

If Riptide was impressed, she didn’t show it.

Percy wadded up his falafel wrapper. Along with being a water-breather, the dude also had the ability to inhale food.

“So,” he said, “when do you guys sail out?”

Alex raised an eyebrow at me like *Yeah, Magnus. When do we sail out?*

I'd been trying to avoid this topic with Fierro for the past two weeks, without much luck.

"Soon," I said. "We don't exactly know where we're headed, or how long it'll take to get there—"

"Story of my life," said Percy.

—"but we have to find Loki's big nasty ship of death before it sails at Midsummer. It's docked somewhere along the border between Niflheim and Jotunheim. We're estimating it'll take a couple of weeks to sail that distance."

"Which means," Alex said, "we really should've left already. We definitely have to sail by the end of the week, ready or not."

In his dark lenses, I saw the reflection of my own worried face. We both knew we were as far from *ready* as we were from Niflheim.

Annabeth tucked her feet underneath her. Her long blond hair was tied back in a ponytail. Her dark blue T-shirt was emblazoned with the yellow words COLLEGE OF ENVIRONMENTAL DESIGN, UC BERKELEY.

"Heroes never get to be ready, do we?" she said. "We just do the best we can."

Percy nodded. "Yep. Usually it works out. We haven't died yet."

"Though you keep *trying*." Annabeth elbowed him. Percy put his arm around her. She nestled comfortably against his side. He kissed the blond curls on the top of her head.

This show of affection made my heart do a painful little twist.

I was glad to see my cousin so happy, but it reminded me how much was at stake if I failed to stop Loki.

Alex and I had already died. We would never age. We'd live in Valhalla until Doomsday came around (unless we got killed outside the hotel before that). The best life we could hope for was training for Ragnarok, postponing that inevitable battle as many centuries as possible, and then, one day, marching out of Valhalla with Odin's army and dying a glorious death while the Nine Worlds burned around us. Fun.

But Annabeth and Percy had a chance for a normal life. They'd already made it through high school, which Annabeth told me was the most dangerous time for Greek demigods. In the fall, they'd go off to college on the West Coast. If they made it through *that*, they had a decent chance of surviving adulthood. They could live in the mortal world without monsters attacking them every five minutes.

*Unless my friends and I failed to stop Loki, in which case the world—all the worlds—would end in a few weeks. But, you know...no pressure.*

I set down my pita sandwich. Even falafel could only do so much to lift my spirits.

“What about you guys?” I asked. “Straight back to New York today?”

“Yeah,” Percy said. “I gotta babysit tonight. I’m psyched!”

“That’s right,” I remembered. “Your new baby sister.”

*Yet another important life hanging in the balance,* I thought.

But I managed a smile. “Congratulations, man. What’s her name?”

“Estelle. It was my grandmother’s name. Um, on my mom’s side, obviously. Not Poseidon’s.”

“I approve,” Alex said. “Old-fashioned and elegant. Estelle Jackson.”

“Well, Estelle *Blofis*,” Percy corrected. “My stepdad is Paul Blofis. Not much I can do about that surname, but my little sis is awesome. Five fingers. Five toes. Two eyes. She drools a lot.”

“Just like her brother,” Annabeth said.

Alex laughed.

I could totally imagine Percy bouncing baby Estelle in his arms, singing “Under the Sea” from *The Little Mermaid*. That made me feel even more miserable.

Somehow I had to buy little Estelle enough decades to have a proper life. I had to find Loki’s demonic ship full of zombie warriors, stop it from sailing off into battle and triggering Ragnarok, then recapture Loki and put him back in chains so he couldn’t cause any more world-burning mischief. (Or at least not as *much* world-burning mischief.)

“Hey.” Alex threw a piece of pita at me. “Stop looking so glum.”

“Sorry.” I tried to appear more cheerful. It wasn’t as easy as mending my ankle by sheer force of will. “I’m looking forward to meeting Estelle someday, when we get back from our quest. And I appreciate you guys coming up to Boston. Really.”

Percy glanced over at Jack, who was still chatting up Riptide. “Sorry I couldn’t be more help. The sea is”—he shrugged—“kinda unpredictable.”

Alex stretched his legs. “At least Magnus fell a lot better the second time. If worse comes to worst, I can always turn into a dolphin and save his sorry butt.”

The corner of Percy’s mouth twitched. “You can turn into a dolphin?”

“I’m a child of Loki. Want to see?”

“No, I believe you.” Percy gazed into the distance. “I’ve got a friend named Frank who’s a shape-shifter. He does dolphins. Also giant goldfish.”

I shuddered, imagining Alex Fierro as a giant pink-and-green koi. “We’ll make do. We’ve got a good team.”

“That’s important,” Percy agreed. “Probably more important than having sea skills...” He straightened and furrowed his eyebrows.

Annabeth unfolded herself from his side. “Uh-oh. I know that look. You’ve got an idea.”

“Something my dad told me...” Percy rose. He walked over to his sword, interrupting Jack in the middle of a fascinating tale about the time he’d embroidered a giant’s bowling bag. Percy picked up Riptide and studied her blade.

“Hey, man,” Jack complained. “We were just starting to hit it off.”

“Sorry, Jack.” From his pocket, Percy pulled out his pen cap and touched it to the tip of his sword. With a faint *shink*, Riptide shrank back into a ballpoint. “Poseidon and I had this conversation about weapons one time. He told me that all sea gods have one thing in common: they’re really vain and possessive when it comes to their magic items.”

Annabeth rolled her eyes. “That sounds like *every* god we’ve met.”

“True,” Percy said. “But sea gods even more so. Triton *sleeps* with his conch-shell trumpet. Galatea spends most of her time polishing her magic sea-horse saddle. And my dad is super-paranoid about losing his trident.”

I thought about my one and only encounter with a Norse sea goddess. It hadn’t gone well. Ran had promised to destroy me if I ever sailed into her waters again. But she *had* been obsessed with her magical nets and the junk collection that swirled inside them. Because of that, I’d been able to trick her into giving me my sword.

“You’re saying I’ll have to use their own stuff against them,” I guessed.

“Right,” Percy confirmed. “Also, what you said about having a good team—sometimes being the son of a sea god hasn’t been enough to save me, even underwater. One time, my friend Jason and I got pulled to the bottom of the Mediterranean by this storm goddess, Kymopoleia? I was useless. Jason saved my butt by offering to make trading cards and action figures of her.”

Alex almost choked on his falafel. “*What?*”

“The point is,” Percy continued, “Jason knew nothing about the ocean. He saved me anyway. It was kind of embarrassing.”

Annabeth smirked. "I guess so. I never heard the details about that."

Percy's ears turned as pink as Alex's jeans. "Anyway, maybe we've been looking at this all wrong. I've been trying to teach you sea skills. But the most important thing is to use whatever you've got on hand—your team, your wits, the enemy's own magical stuff."

"And there's no way to plan for that," I said.

"Exactly!" Percy said. "My work here is done!"

Annabeth frowned. "Percy, you're saying the best plan is no plan. As a child of Athena, I can't really endorse that."

"Yeah," Alex said. "And, personally, I still like *my* plan of turning into a sea mammal."

Percy raised his hands. "All I'm saying is the most powerful demigod of our generation is sitting right here, and it isn't me." He nodded to Annabeth. "Wise Girl can't shape-shift or breathe underwater or talk to pegasi. She can't fly, and she isn't superstrong. But she's *crazy* smart and good at improvising. That's what makes her deadly. Doesn't matter whether she's on land, in water, in the air, or in Tartarus. Magnus, you were training with me all weekend. I think you should've been training with Annabeth instead."

Annabeth's stormy gray eyes were hard to read. At last she said, "Okay, that was sweet." She kissed Percy on the cheek.

Alex nodded. "Not bad, Seaweed Brain."

"Don't you start with that nickname, too," Percy muttered.

From the wharf came the deep rumbling sound of warehouse doors rolling open. Voices echoed off the sides of the buildings.

"That's our cue to leave," I said. "This ship just got back from dry dock. They're reopening it to the public tonight in a big ceremony."

"Yeah," Alex said. "The glamour won't obscure our presence once the whole crew is aboard."

Percy arched an eyebrow. "Glamour? You mean like your outfit?"

Alex snorted. "No. Glamour as in illusion magic. It's the force that clouds the vision of regular mortals."

"Huh," Percy said. "We call that the Mist."

Annabeth rapped her knuckles on Percy's head. "Whatever we call it, we'd better hurry. Help me clean up."

We reached the bottom of the gangplank just as the first sailors were arriving. Jack floated along ahead of us, glowing different colors and

singing “Walk Like a Man” in a terrible falsetto. Alex changed form from a cheetah to a wolf to a flamingo. (He does a great flamingo.)

The sailors gave us blank looks and a wide berth, but nobody challenged us.

Once we were clear of the docks, Jack turned into a runestone pendant. He dropped into my hand and I reattached him to the chain around my neck. It wasn’t like him to shut up so suddenly. I figured he was miffed about his date with Riptide being cut short.

As we strolled down Constitution Road, Percy turned to me. “What was that back there—the shape-shifting, the singing sword? Were you *trying* to get caught?”

“Nah,” I said. “If you flaunt the weird magical stuff, it confuses mortals even more.” It felt good to be able to teach *him* something. “It kind of short-circuits mortal brains, makes them avoid you.”

“Huh.” Annabeth shook her head. “All these years sneaking around, and we could’ve just been ourselves?”

“You should *always* do that.” Alex strolled alongside, back in human form, though he still had a few flamingo feathers stuck in his hair. “And you have to flaunt the weird, my friends.”

“I’m going to quote you on that,” Percy said.

“You’d better.”

We stopped at the corner, where Percy’s Toyota Prius was parked at a meter. I shook his hand and got a big hug from Annabeth.

My cousin gripped my shoulders. She studied my face, her gray eyes tight with concern. “Take care of yourself, Magnus. You *will* come back safely. That’s an order.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I promised. “We Chases have to stick together.”

“Speaking of that...” She lowered her voice. “Have you been over there yet?”

I felt like I was in free fall again, swan-diving toward a painful death.

“Not yet,” I admitted. “Today. I promise.”

The last I saw of Percy and Annabeth, their Prius was turning the corner on First Avenue, Percy singing along with Led Zeppelin on the radio, Annabeth laughing at his bad voice.

Alex crossed his arms. “If those two were any cuter together, they’d cause a nuclear explosion of cuteness and destroy the Eastern Seaboard.”

“Is that your idea of a compliment?” I asked.

“Probably as close as *you’ll* ever hear.” He glanced over. “Where did you promise Annabeth you would go?”

My mouth tasted like I’d been chewing foil. “My uncle’s house. There’s something I need to do.”

“Ohhh.” Alex nodded. “I hate that place.”

I’d been avoiding this task for weeks. I didn’t want to do it alone. I also didn’t want to ask any of my other friends—Samirah, Hearthstone, Blitzen, or the rest of the gang from floor nineteen of the Hotel Valhalla. It felt too personal, too painful. But Alex had been to the Chase mansion with me before. The idea of his company didn’t bother me. In fact, I realized with surprise, I wanted him along pretty badly.

“Uh...” I cleared the last falafel and seawater out of my throat. “You want to come with me to a creepy mansion and look through a dead guy’s stuff?”

Alex beamed. “I thought you’d never ask.”



## I Inherit a Dead Wolf and Some Underwear

“THAT’S NEW,” said Alex.

The brownstone’s front door had been forced open, the dead bolt busted out of the frame. In the foyer, sprawled across the Oriental rug, lay the carcass of a wolf.

I shuddered.

You couldn’t swing a battle-ax in the Nine Worlds without hitting some kind of wolf: Fenris Wolf, Odin’s wolves, Loki’s wolves, werewolves, big bad wolfs, and independently contracted small business wolves that would kill anybody for the right price.

The dead wolf in Uncle Randolph’s foyer looked very much like the beasts that had attacked my mom two years ago, the night she died.

Wisps of blue luminescence clung to its shaggy black coat. Its mouth was contorted in a permanent snarl. On the top of its head, seared into the skin, was a Viking rune, though the fur around it was so badly burned I couldn’t tell which symbol it was. My friend Hearthstone might have been able to identify it.

Alex circled its pony-size carcass. He kicked it in the ribs. The creature remained obligingly dead.

“Its body hasn’t started to dissolve,” he noted. “Usually monsters disintegrate pretty soon after you kill them. You can still smell the burning fur on this one. Must’ve happened recently.”

“You think the rune was some kind of trap?”

Alex smirked. “I think your uncle knew a thing or two about magic. The wolf hit the carpet, triggering that rune, and BAM!”

I remembered all the times when, as a homeless kid, I'd broken into Uncle Randolph's house when he wasn't there to steal food, rifle through his office, or just be annoying. I'd never been *bammed*. I'd always considered Randolph a failure at home security. Now I felt a little nauseous, wondering if I could've ended up dead on the welcome mat with a rune burned into my forehead.

Was this trap the reason Randolph's will had been so specific about Annabeth and me visiting the property before we took possession? Had Randolph been trying to get some postmortem revenge?

"You think the rest of the house is safe to explore?" I asked.

"Nope," Alex said cheerfully. "So let's do it."

On the first floor, we found no more dead wolves. No runes exploded in our faces. The most gruesome thing we discovered was in Uncle Randolph's refrigerator, where expired yogurt, sour milk, and moldy carrots were evolving into a preindustrial society. Randolph hadn't even left me any chocolate in the pantry, the old villain.

On the second floor, nothing had changed. In Randolph's study, the sun streamed through the stained-glass window, slanting red and orange light across the bookshelves and the displays of Viking artifacts. In one corner sat a big runestone carved with the sneering red face of (naturally) a wolf. Tattered maps and faded yellow parchments covered Randolph's desk. I scanned the documents, looking for something new, something important, but I saw nothing I hadn't seen the last time I'd been here.

I remembered the wording of Randolph's will, which Annabeth had sent me.

*It is critical, Randolph had stated, that my beloved nephew Magnus examine my worldly belongings as soon as possible. He should pay special attention to my papers.*

I didn't know why Randolph had put those lines in his will. In his desk drawers, I found no letter addressed to me, no heartfelt apology like *Dear Magnus, I'm sorry I got you killed, then betrayed you by siding with Loki, then stabbed your friend Blitzen, then almost got you killed again.*

He hadn't even left me the mansion's Wi-Fi password.

I gazed out the office window. Across the street in the Commonwealth Mall, folks were walking their dogs, playing Frisbee, enjoying the nice weather. The statue of Leif Erikson stood on his pedestal, proudly flaunting

his metal bra, surveying the traffic on Charlesgate, and probably wondering why he wasn't in Scandinavia.

"So." Alex came up next to me. "You inherit all of this, huh?"

During our walk over, I'd told him the basics about Uncle Randolph's will, but Alex still looked incredulous, almost offended.

"Randolph left the house to Annabeth and me," I said. "Technically, I'm dead. That means it's all Annabeth's. Randolph's lawyers contacted Annabeth's dad, who told her, who told me. Annabeth asked me to check it out and"—I shrugged—"decide what to do with this place."

From the nearest bookshelf, Alex picked up a framed photo of Uncle Randolph with his wife and daughters. I'd never met Caroline, Emma, or Aubrey. They'd died in a storm at sea many years ago. But I'd seen them in my nightmares. I knew they were the leverage Loki had used to warp my uncle, promising Randolph that he could see his family again if he helped Loki escape his bonds....And in a way, Loki had told the truth. The last time I'd seen Uncle Randolph, he was tumbling into a chasm straight to Helheim, the land of the dishonorable dead.

Alex turned over the photo, maybe hoping to find a secret note on the back. The last time we'd been in this office, we'd found a wedding invitation that way, and it had led us into all sorts of trouble. This time, there was no hidden message—just blank brown paper, which was a lot less painful to look at than the smiling faces of my dead relatives.

Alex put the picture back on the shelf. "Annabeth doesn't care what you do with the house?"

"Not really. She's got enough going on with college and, you know, demigod stuff. She just wants me to let her know if I find anything interesting—old photo albums, family history, that kind of thing."

Alex wrinkled his nose. "Family history." His face had the same slightly disgusted, slightly intrigued expression as when he'd kicked the dead wolf. "So what's upstairs?"

"I'm not sure. When I was a kid, we weren't allowed above the first two floors. And the few times I broke in more recently..." I turned up my palms. "I guess I never made it that far."

Alex peered at me over the top of his glasses, his dark brown eye and his amber eye like mismatched moons cresting the horizon. "Sounds intriguing. Let's go."

The third floor consisted of two large bedrooms. The front one was spotlessly clean, cold, and impersonal. Two twin beds. A dresser. Bare walls. Maybe a guest room, though I doubted Randolph entertained many people. Or maybe this had been Emma and Aubrey's room. If so, Randolph had removed all traces of their personalities, leaving a white void in the middle of the house. We didn't linger.

The second bedroom must have been Randolph's. It smelled like his old-fashioned clove cologne. Towers of musty books leaned against the walls. Chocolate-bar wrappers filled the wastebasket. Randolph had probably eaten his entire stash right before leaving home to help Loki destroy the world.

I supposed I couldn't blame him. I always say, *Eat chocolate first, destroy the world later.*

Alex hopped onto the four-poster bed. He bounced up and down, grinning as the springs squeaked.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Making noise." He leaned over and rifled through Randolph's nightstand drawer. "Let's see. Cough drops. Paper clips. Some wadded-up Kleenex that I am not going to touch. And..." He whistled. "Medication for bowel discomfort! Magnus, all this bounty belongs to you!"

"You're a strange person."

"I prefer the term *fabulously weird*."

We searched the rest of the bedroom, though I wasn't sure what I was looking for. *Pay special attention to my papers*, Randolph's will had urged. I doubted he meant the wadded-up tissues.

Annabeth hadn't been able to get much information out of Randolph's lawyers. Our uncle had apparently revised his will the day before he died. That might mean Randolph had known he didn't have long to live, felt some guilt about betraying me, and wanted to leave me some sort of last message. Or it might mean he'd revised the will because Loki had ordered him to. But if this was a trap to lure me here, then why was there a dead wolf in the foyer?

I found no secret papers in Randolph's closet. His bathroom was unremarkable except for an impressive collection of half-empty Listerine bottles. His underwear drawer was packed with enough navy-blue Jockeys to outfit a squadron of Randolphs—all briefs, perfectly starched, ironed, and folded. Some things defy explanation.

On the next floor, two more empty bedrooms. Nothing dangerous like wolves, exploding runes, or old-dude underwear.

The top floor was a sprawling library even larger than the one in Randolph's office. A haphazard collection of novels lined the shelves. A small kitchenette took up one corner of the room, complete with a mini fridge and an electric teapot and—CURSE YOU, RANDOLPH!—still no chocolate. The windows looked out over the green-shingled rooftops of Back Bay. At the far end of the room, a staircase led up to what I assumed would be a roof deck.

A comfy-looking leather chair faced the fireplace. Carved in the center of the marble surround was (of course) a snarling wolf's head. On the mantel, in a silver tripod stand, sat a Norse drinking horn with a leather strap and a silver rim etched with runic designs. I'd seen thousands of horns like that in Valhalla, but it surprised me to find one here. Randolph had never struck me as the mead-swilling type. Maybe he sipped his Earl Grey tea out of it.

*“Madre de Dios,”* Alex said.

I stared at him. It was the first time I'd ever heard him speak Spanish.

He tapped one of the framed photos on the wall and gave me a wicked grin. *“Please tell me this is you.”*

The picture was a shot of my mother with her usual pixie haircut and brilliant smile, jeans, and flannel camping shirt. She stood in the hollowed-out trunk of a sycamore tree, holding a baby Magnus up to the camera—my hair a tuft of white gold, my mouth glistening with drool, my gray eyes wide like *What the heck am I doing here?*

“That’s me,” I admitted.

“You were *so* cute.” Alex glanced over. “What happened?”

“Ha, ha.”

I scanned the wall of photos. I was amazed Uncle Randolph had kept one of me and my mom right where he’d see it whenever he sat in his comfy chair, almost as if he actually cared about us.

Another photo showed the three Chase siblings as children—Natalie, Frederick, and Randolph—all dressed in World War II military uniforms, brandishing fake rifles. Halloween, I guessed. Next to that was a picture of my grandparents: a frowning, white-haired couple dressed in clashing 1970s-style plaid clothes, like they were either on their way to church or the senior citizens’ disco.

Confession: I had trouble telling my grandfather and grandmother apart. They'd died before I could meet them, but from their pictures, you could tell they were one of those couples that had grown to resemble each other over the years until they were virtually indistinguishable. Same white helmet-hair. Same glasses. Same wispy mustaches. In the photo, a few Viking artifacts, including the mead horn that now sat on Randolph's mantel, hung on the wall behind them. I'd had no idea my grandparents were into Norse stuff, too. I wondered if they'd ever traveled the Nine Worlds. That might explain their confused, slightly cross-eyed expressions.

Alex perused the titles on the bookshelves.

"Anything good?" I asked.

He shrugged. "*The Lord of the Rings*. Not bad. Sylvia Plath. Nice. Oh, *The Left Hand of Darkness*. I love that book. The rest...meh. His collection is a little heavy on dead white males for my taste."

"I'm a dead white male," I noted.

Alex raised one eyebrow. "Yes, you are."

I hadn't realized Alex was a reader. I was tempted to ask if he liked some of my favorites: Scott Pilgrim or maybe *Sandman*. Those were fabulously weird. But I decided this might not be the right time to start a book club.

I searched the shelves for diaries or hidden compartments.

Alex meandered over to the last flight of stairs. He peered upward and his complexion turned as green as his hair. "Uh, Magnus? You should probably see this."

I joined him.

At the top of the staircase, a domed Plexiglas hatch led to the roof. And on the other side, pacing and snarling, was another wolf.



## But Wait. Act Now, and You Get a *Second* Wolf Free!

“HOW DO you want to handle this?” I asked.

From his belt loops, Alex pulled the golden wire that served triple duty as fashion accessory, ceramic-cutting tool, and melee weapon. “I was thinking we should kill it.”

The wolf growled and clawed at the hatch. Magical runes glowed on the Plexiglas. The beast’s facial fur was already smoking and charred from previous attempts to bust in.

I wondered how long the wolf had been on the roof, and why it hadn’t tried to gain access another way. Maybe it didn’t want to end up dead like its friend downstairs. Or maybe it was single-mindedly focused on this particular room.

“It wants something,” I guessed.

“To kill us,” Alex said. “Which is why we should kill it first. You want to open the hatch or—?”

“Wait.” Normally I would’ve been all in favor of killing a glowing blue wolf, but something about this animal bothered me...the way its cold dark eyes seemed to be looking past us, as if searching for different prey. “What if we let it in?”

Alex stared at me like I was crazy. He did that a lot. “You want to offer it a cup of tea? Maybe lend it a book?”

“It has to be here on a mission,” I persisted. “Somebody sent those wolves to retrieve something—maybe the same something I’m looking for.”

Alex considered. “You think Loki sent the wolves.”

I shrugged. “Loki’s gonna Loki.”

“And if we let the wolf in, you think it might make a beeline for whatever it’s hunting.”

“I’m pretty sure it isn’t here for the irritable bowel medicine.”

Alex loosened his checkered tie even more. “Okay. We open the hatch, watch where the wolf goes, and *then* we kill it.”

“Right.” I pulled the runestone pendant off my neck chain. Jack grew into sword form, though he felt heavier than usual, like a kid having a meltdown on the floor of a department store.

“What is it now?” He sighed. “Can’t you see I’m dying of a broken heart?”

I could have pointed out that he was incapable of dying, and he had no actual heart, but I thought that would be mean. “Sorry, Jack. We have a wolf to deal with.”

I explained to him what was going on.

Jack’s blade glowed violet. “But Riptide’s razor-sharp edges,” he said dreamily. “Did you see her edges?”

“Yeah. Great edges. Now how about we prevent Loki from launching his mighty death ship and starting Ragnarok? Then maybe we can arrange a second date for you and Riptide.”

Another heavy sigh. “Wolf. Roof. Hatch. Got it.”

I glanced at Alex and stifled a shriek. While I wasn’t looking, he’d transformed into a large timber wolf.

“Do you *have* to turn into animals behind my back?” I asked.

Alex bared his fangs in a canine grin. He snout-pointed toward the top of the stairs like *What are you waiting for? I’m a wolf. I can’t open that hatch.*

I climbed to the top of the stairs. The temperature was like the inside of a greenhouse. On the other side of the hatch, the wolf snuffled and chewed at the Plexiglas, leaving drool smears and fang marks. Those protective-barrier runes must have tasted great. Being this close to an enemy wolf made the hairs on the back of my neck do corkscrews.

What would happen if I opened the hatch? Would the runes kill me? Would they kill the wolf? Or would they deactivate if I let the wolf in of my own free will, since that was literally the stupidest thing I could do?

The wolf slavered at the Plexiglas.

“Hey, buddy,” I said.

Jack buzzed in my hand. “What?”

“Not you, Jack. I’m talking to the wolf.” I smiled at the beast, then remembered that showing teeth meant aggression to canines. I pouted instead. “I’m going to let you in. Won’t that be nice? Then you can get whatever you came for, since I know you’re not here to kill me, right?”

The wolf’s snarl was not reassuring.

“Okay, then,” I said. “One, two, three!”

I pushed against the hatch with all my einherji strength, shoving the wolf back as I surged onto the roof deck. I had time to register a barbecue grill, some planters overflowing with hibiscus, and two lounge chairs overlooking an amazing view of the Charles River. I wanted to slap Uncle Randolph for never telling me he had such a cool party spot.

The wolf stepped from behind the hatch and growled, its hackles raised like a shaggy dorsal fin. One of its eyes was swollen shut, the eyelid burned from contact with my uncle’s rune trap.

“Now?” Jack asked with no particular enthusiasm.

“Not yet.” I flexed my knees, ready to spring into action if necessary. I would show this wolf how well I could fight...or, you know, how fast I could run away, depending on what the situation called for.

The wolf regarded me with its one good eye. It snorted dismissively and bolted down the stairwell into the town house.

I wasn’t sure whether to be relieved or insulted.

I ran after it. By the time I reached the bottom of the stairs, Alex and the other wolf were having a snarl-off in the middle of the library. They bared their teeth and circled one another, looking for any signs of fear or weakness. The blue wolf was much larger. The neon wisps glowing in its fur gave it a certain cool factor. But it was also half-blind and wincing in pain. Alex, being Alex, showed no sign of being intimidated. He stood his ground as the other wolf edged around him.

Once our glowing blue visitor was confident Alex wasn’t going to attack, it raised its snout and sniffed the air. I expected it to run toward the bookshelves and chomp some secret book of nautical maps, or maybe a copy of *How to Stop Loki’s Ship of Death in Three Easy Steps!* Instead, the wolf lunged toward the fireplace, jumped at the mantel, and grabbed the mead horn in its mouth.

Some sluggish part of my brain thought, *Hey, I should probably stop it.*

Alex was way ahead of me. In one fluid movement, he morphed back into human form, stepped forward, and lashed out with his garrote like he

was throwing a bowling ball. (Actually, it was a lot more graceful than that. I'd seen Alex bowl, and it wasn't pretty.) The golden cord wrapped around the wolf's neck. With one yank backward, Alex cured the wolf of any future headache problems.

The decapitated carcass flopped against the carpet. It began to sizzle, disintegrating until only the drinking horn and a few tufts of fur remained.

Jack's blade turned heavier in my grip. "Well, fine," he said. "I guess you didn't need me after all. I'll just go write some love poetry and cry a lot." He shrank back into a runestone pendant.

Alex crouched next to the mead horn. "Any idea why a wolf would want a decorative drinking vessel?"

I knelt next to him, picked up the horn, and looked inside. Rolled up and crammed into the horn was a small leather book like a diary. I pulled it out and fanned the pages: drawings of Viking runes, interspersed with paragraphs written in Uncle Randolph's cramped cursive.

"I think," I said, "we've found the right dead white male author."

We reclined in the lounge chairs on the roof deck.

While I flipped through my uncle's notebook, trying to make sense of his frenzied rune drawings and cursive crazy talk, Alex relaxed and sipped guava juice from the mead horn.

Why Uncle Randolph kept guava juice in his library's mini fridge, I couldn't tell you.

Every so often, just to annoy me, Alex slurped with exaggerated gusto and smacked his lips. "Ahhhh."

"Are you sure it's safe to drink from that horn?" I asked. "It could be cursed or something."

Alex grabbed his throat and pretended to choke. "Oh, no! I'm turning into a frog!"

"Please don't."

He pointed at the diary. "Any luck with that?"

I stared at the pages. Runes swam in front of my eyes. The notations were in a mix of languages: Old Norse, Swedish, and some I couldn't begin to guess. Even the passages in English made little sense. I felt like I was trying to read an advanced quantum physics textbook backward in a mirror.

“Most of it’s over my head,” I admitted. “The earlier pages look like they’re about Randolph’s search for the Sword of Summer. I recognize some of the references. But here at the end...”

The last few pages were more hastily written. Randolph’s writing turned shaky and frantic. Splotches of dried blood freckled the paper. I remembered that, in the tomb of the Viking zombies in Provincetown, Randolph had gotten several of his fingers lopped off. These pages might have been written after that, with his nondominant hand. The watery cursive reminded me of the way I used to write back in elementary school, when my teacher forced me to use my right hand.

On the last page, Randolph had scratched my name: *Magnus*.

Under that, he’d sketched two serpents interlocking in a figure eight. The quality of the drawing was terrible, but I recognized the symbol. Alex had the same thing tattooed on the nape of his neck: the sign of Loki.

Below that was a term in what I assumed was Old Norse: *mjöð*. Then some notes in English: *Might stop L. Whetstone of Bolverk > guards. Where?*

That last word trailed downward, the question mark a desperate scrawl.

“What do you make of this?” I passed the book to Alex.

He frowned. “That’s my mom’s symbol, obviously.”

(You heard right. Loki was normally a male god, but he happened to be Alex’s mother. Long story.)

“And the rest of it?” I asked.

“This word looks like *moo* with a *j*. Perhaps Scandinavian cows have an accent?”

“I take it you don’t read Old Norse, then, or whatever that language is?”

“Magnus, it may shock you to learn that I do not have every talent in the world. Just most of the important ones.”

He squinted at the page. When he concentrated, the left corner of his mouth twitched like he was enjoying a secret joke. I found that tic distracting. I wanted to know what he found so funny.

“‘Might stop L,’” Alex read. “Let’s assume that’s Loki. ‘Whetstone of Bolverk.’ You think that’s the same thing as the Skofnung Stone?”

I shuddered. We’d lost the Skofnung Stone and Skofnung Sword during a wedding party in Loki’s cavern, when he’d escaped the bindings that had held him for a thousand years. (Oops. Our bad.) I never wanted to see that particular whetstone again.

“I hope not,” I said. “Ever heard the name Bolverk?”

“Nope.” Alex finished his guava juice. “I’m kind of digging this mead horn, though. You mind if I keep it?”

“All yours.” I found the idea of Alex taking a souvenir from my family mansion strangely pleasing. “So if Randolph wanted me to find that book, and Loki sent the wolves to get it before I could—”

Alex tossed the journal back to me. “Assuming what you just said is true, and assuming it’s not a trap, and assuming those notes aren’t the ramblings of a madman?”

“Uh...yeah.”

“Then best-case scenario: Your uncle came up with an idea to stop Loki. It wasn’t something he could do himself, but he hoped you could. It involves a whetstone, a Bolverk, and possibly a Scandinavian cow.”

“When you put it like that, it doesn’t sound so promising.”

Alex poked the tip of the mead horn. “Sorry to burst your bubble, but most plans to stop Loki fail. We know this.”

The bitter edge in his voice surprised me.

“You’re thinking about your training sessions with Sam,” I guessed.  
“How are they going?”

Alex’s face told me the answer.

Among Loki’s many disturbing qualities, he could command his children to do whatever he wanted whenever they were in his presence, which made family reunions a real drag.

Alex was the exception. He’d somehow learned to resist Loki’s power, and for the past six weeks, he’d been trying to teach his half sister Samirah al-Abbas to do the same. The fact that neither of them talked much about their training suggested that it hadn’t been a rousing success.

“She’s trying,” Alex said. “It doesn’t make it easier that she’s...” He stopped himself.

“What?”

“Never mind. I promised not to talk about it.”

“Now I’m really curious. Is everything okay with her and Amir?”

Alex snorted. “Oh, yeah. They’re still head over heels, dreaming of the day when they can get married. I swear, if those two didn’t have me to chaperone them, they’d do something crazy like hold hands.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

Alex waved off my question. “All I’m saying is that you shouldn’t trust anything you get from your Uncle Randolph. Not the advice in that book. Not this house. Anything you inherit from family...it *always* comes with strings attached.”

That seemed a strange thing for him to say, considering he’d been enjoying the view from Randolph’s magnificent roof deck while sipping chilled guava juice from his Viking mead horn, but I got the feeling Alex wasn’t really thinking about my dysfunctional uncle.

“You never talk much about your family,” I noted. “I mean your mortal family.”

He stared at me darkly. “And I’m not going to start now. If you knew *half* the—”

*BRAWK!* In a flutter of black feathers, a raven landed on the tip of Alex’s boot.

You don’t see a lot of wild ravens in Boston. Canadian geese, seagulls, ducks, pigeons, even hawks, sure. But when a huge black raptor lands on your foot, that can only mean one thing: a message from Valhalla.

Alex held out his hand. (Not normally recommended with ravens. They have a vicious bite.) The bird hopped on his wrist, barfed up a hard pellet the size of a pecan right into Alex’s palm, and then flew away, its mission accomplished.

Yes, our ravens deliver messages via barf-mail. Ravens have a natural ability to regurgitate inedible substances like bones and fur, so they have no qualms about swallowing a message capsule, flying it across the Nine Worlds, and vomiting it to the correct recipient. It wouldn’t have been *my* chosen career, but hey, no judgment.

Alex cracked open the pellet. He unfolded the letter and began to read, the corner of his mouth starting to twitch again. “It’s from T.J.,” he said. “Looks like we’re leaving today. Right now, in fact.”

“What?” I sat up in my recliner. “Why?”

Of course, I’d known we were running out of time. We had to leave soon in order to reach Loki’s ship before Midsummer. But there was a big difference between *soon* and *right now*. I wasn’t a big fan of *right now*.

Alex kept reading. “Something about the tide? I dunno. I’d better go bust Samirah out of school. She’ll be in Calculus. She’s not going to be happy about leaving.”

He rose and offered me a hand.

I didn't want to get up. I wanted to stay there on that deck with Alex and watch the afternoon sunlight change the color of the river from blue to amber. Maybe we could read some of Randolph's old paperbacks. We could drink all his guava juice. But the raven had barfed up our orders. You couldn't argue with raven barf.

I took Alex's hand and got to my feet. "You want me to come with you?"

Alex frowned. "No, dummy. You've got to get back to Valhalla. You're the one with the boat. Speaking of which, have you warned the others about —?"

"No," I said, my face burning. "Not yet."

Alex laughed. "That should be interesting. Don't wait for Sam and me. We'll catch up with you somewhere along the way!"

Before I could ask what he meant by that, Alex turned into a flamingo and launched himself into the sky, making it a banner day for Boston bird-watchers.



## I Bid Farewell to Erik, Erik, Erik, and Also Erik

**LEGENDS TELL US** that Valhalla has 540 doors, conveniently distributed across the Nine Worlds for easy access.

The legends don't mention that one of those entrances is in the Forever 21 store on Newbury Street, just behind the women's activewear rack.

It normally wasn't the entrance I liked to use, but it *was* the closest to Uncle Randolph's mansion. Nobody in Valhalla could explain to me why we had a gateway in Forever 21. Some speculated it was left over from a time when the building was not a retail store. Personally, I thought the location might be one of Odin's little jokes, since a lot of his einherjar were literally forever twenty-one, or sixteen, or sixty.

My dwarf friend Blitzen especially hated that entrance. Every time I mentioned Forever 21, he would launch into a rant about how *his* fashions were much better. Something about hemlines. I don't know.

I strolled through the lingerie section, getting a strange look from a saleslady, then dove into the activewear rack and popped out the other side into one of the Hotel Valhalla's game rooms. There was a pool tournament in progress, which Vikings play with spears instead of pool cues. (Hint: Never stand behind a Viking when he shoots.) Erik the Green from floor 135 greeted me cheerfully. (From what I can tell, approximately 72 percent of the population of Valhalla is named Erik.)

"Hail, Magnus Chase!" He pointed at my shoulder. "You've got some spandex just there."

"Oh, thanks." I untangled the yoga pants that had gotten stuck on my shirt and tossed them into the bin marked FOR RESTOCKING.

Then I strode off to find my friends.

Walking through the Hotel Valhalla never got old. At least it hadn't for me so far, and einherjar who'd been here hundreds of years had told me the same thing. Thanks to the power of Odin, or the magic of the Norns, or maybe just the fact that we had an on-site IKEA, the decor was constantly changing, though it always incorporated a lot of spears and shields, and perhaps more wolf motifs than I would've liked.

Even just finding the elevators required me to navigate hallways that had changed size and direction since the morning, past rooms I'd never seen before. In one enormous oak-paneled lounge, warriors played shuffleboard with oars for pushers and combat shields for pucks. Many of the players sported leg splints, arm slings, and head bandages, because—of course—einherjar played shuffleboard to the death.

The main lobby had been re-carpeted in deep crimson, a great color to hide bloodstains. The walls were now hung with tapestries depicting Valkyries flying into battle against fire giants. It was beautiful work, though the proximity of so many wall torches made me nervous. Valhalla was pretty lax about safety codes. I didn't like burning to death. (It was one of my least favorite ways to die, right up there with choking on the after-dinner mints in the feast hall.)

I took the elevator up to floor nineteen. Unfortunately, the elevator music hadn't changed. It was getting to the point where I could sing along with Frank Sinatra in Norwegian. I was just glad I lived on a low floor. If I lived somewhere up in the hundreds, I would have gone...well, berserk.

On floor nineteen, everything was strangely quiet. No sounds of video-game violence emanated from Thomas Jefferson Jr.'s room. (Dead Civil War soldiers *love* their video games almost as much as they love charging up hills.) I saw no signs that Mallory Keen had been practicing her knife-throwing in the hallway. Halfborn Gunderson's room was open and being serviced by a flock of ravens, who swirled through his library and his weapons collection, dusting books and battle-axes. The big man himself was nowhere to be seen.

My own room had recently been cleaned. The bed was made. In the central atrium, the trees had been pruned and the grass mowed. (I could never figure out how the ravens operated a lawn mower.) On the coffee table, a note in T.J.'s elegant script read:

## We're at dock 23, sublevel 6. See you there!

The TV had been turned to the Hotel Valhalla Channel, which displayed a list of the afternoon's events: racquetball, machine-gun tag (like laser tag, except with machine guns), watercolor painting, Italian cooking, advanced sword-sharpening, and something called flyting—all done to the death.

I stared wistfully at the screen. I'd never wanted to practice watercolor painting to the death before, but now I was tempted. It sounded much easier than the trip I was about to take from dock twenty-three, sublevel six.

First things first: I showered off the smell of Boston Harbor. I changed into new clothes. I grabbed my *go* bag: camping supplies, some basic provisions, and, of course, some chocolate bars.

As nice as my hotel suite was, I didn't have much in the way of personal stuff—just a few of my favorite books, and some photos from my past that magically appeared over time, gradually filling up the fireplace mantel.

The hotel wasn't meant to be a forever home. We einherjar might stay here for centuries, but it was only a stopover on our way to Ragnarok. The whole hotel radiated a sense of impermanence and anticipation. *Don't get too comfortable*, it seemed to say. *You might be leaving any minute to go die your final death at Doomsday. Hooray!*

I checked my reflection in the full-length mirror. I wasn't sure why it mattered. I'd never cared much about appearances during the two years I'd lived on the streets, but lately Alex Fierro had been teasing me mercilessly, which made me more conscious of how I looked.

Besides, if you don't check yourself from time to time in Valhalla, you could be walking around for hours with raven poop on your shoulder, or an arrow in your butt, or a pair of yoga pants wrapped around your neck.

Hiking boots: check. New pair of jeans: check. Green Hotel Valhalla T-shirt: check. Down jacket, appropriate for cold-water expeditions and falling off masts: check. Runestone pendant that could turn into a heartbroken magical sword: check.

After living on the streets, I wasn't used to my face looking so clean. I definitely wasn't used to my new haircut, which Blitz had first given me during our expedition into Jotunheim. Since then, every time it started to grow out, Alex hacked it off again, leaving my bangs just long enough to fall in my eyes, the back chopped to collar level. I was used to my hair

being much wilder and more wiry, but Alex took such glee in murdering my blond locks it was impossible to tell him no.

*It's perfect! Alex said. Now you at least look like you're groomed, but your face is still obscured!*

I slipped Randolph's notebook into my pack, along with one last item I'd been trying hard not to think about—a certain silk handkerchief I'd gotten from my father.

I sighed at the Magnus in the mirror. "Well, sir, you'd better get going. Your friends are eagerly waiting to laugh at you."

"There he is!" yelled Halfborn Gunderson, berserker extraordinaire, speaker of the obvious.

He barreled toward me like a friendly Mack truck. His hair was even wilder than mine used to be. (I was pretty sure he cut it himself, using a battle-ax, in the dark.) He wore a T-shirt today, which was unusual, but his arms were still a wild landscape of muscle and tattoo. Strapped across his back was his battle-ax named Battle-Ax, and holstered up and down his leather breeches were half a dozen knives.

He wrapped me in a bear hug and lifted me off my feet, perhaps testing to make sure my rib cage would not crack under pressure. He put me down and patted my arms, apparently satisfied.

"You ready for a quest?" he bellowed. "I'm ready for a quest!"

From the edge of the canal, where she was coiling ropes, Mallory Keen called, "Oh, shut up, you oaf! I still think we should use you as the rudder."

Halfborn's face mottled red, but he kept his eyes on me. "I'm trying not to kill her, Magnus. I really am. But it's so hard. I'd better keep busy or I'm going to do something I'll regret. You have the handkerchief?"

"Uh, yes, but—"

"Good man. Time's a-wasting!"

He tromped back to the dockside and began sorting his supplies—huge canvas duffels no doubt full of food, weapons, and lots of spare leather breeches.

I scanned the length of the cavern. Along the left-hand wall, a river rushed through the canal, emerging from a train-size tunnel on one end and disappearing into an identical tunnel on the other. The barreled ceiling was polished wood, amplifying the water's roar and making me feel like we

were standing inside an old-fashioned root-beer keg. Supplies and baggage lined the dock, just waiting for a ship to be put on.

At the far end of the room, Thomas Jefferson Jr. stood deep in conversation with the hotel manager, Helgi, and his assistant, Hunding, all three of them looking over some paperwork on a clipboard. Since I had an aversion to paperwork and also to Helgi, I walked over to Mallory, who was now stuffing iron grappling hooks into a burlap sack.

She was dressed in black furs and black denim, her red hair pulled back in a severe bun. In the torchlight, her freckles glowed orange. As usual, she wore her trusty pair of knives at her sides.

“Everything good?” I asked, because clearly it wasn’t.

She scowled. “Don’t you start, too, Mister—” She called me a Gaelic term I didn’t recognize, but I was fairly sure it didn’t mean *dearest friend*. “We’ve been waiting on you and the boat.”

“Where are Blitzen and Hearthstone?”

It had been several weeks since I’d seen my dwarf and elf buddies, and I’d been looking forward to them sailing with us. (One of the few things I was looking forward to.)

Mallory grunted impatiently. “We’re picking them up on the way.”

That could have meant we were stopping by a different part of Boston, or stopping by a different world, but Mallory didn’t look like she was in the mood to elaborate. She scanned the space behind me and scowled. “What about Alex and Samirah?”

“Alex said they’d meet us later.”

“Well, then.” Mallory made a shooing gesture. “Go sign us out.”

“Sign us out?”

“Yeah...” She drawled the word to indicate just how slow she thought I was. “With Helgi. The manager. Off you go!”

Since she was still holding a fistful of grappling hooks, I did what she told me.

T.J. had his foot planted on a supply box, his rifle across his back. The brass buttons gleamed on his Union Army coat. He tipped his infantry cap at me in greeting. “Just in time, my friend!”

Helgi and Hunding exchanged nervous looks, the way they did whenever Odin announced one of his motivational staff retreats.

“Magnus Chase,” Helgi said, tugging at his roadkill beard. He was dressed in his usual dark green pinstripe suit, which he probably thought

made him look like a service-industry professional, but only made him look like a Viking in a pinstripe suit. “We were beginning to worry. The high tide will be here any minute.”

I looked at the water raging down the canal. I knew that several subterranean rivers wove their way through Valhalla, but I didn’t understand how they could be subject to tides. I also didn’t see how the water level here could *get* any higher without flooding the entire room. Then again, I was having a conversation with two dead Vikings and a Civil War soldier, so I decided to give logic a rest.

“Sorry,” I said. “I was...”

I waved vaguely, trying to indicate reading mysterious journals, killing wolves, breaking my leg in Boston Harbor.

T.J. practically vibrated with excitement. “You got the boat? I can’t *wait* to see it!”

“Uh, yeah.” I started rummaging in my knapsack, but the handkerchief seemed to have fallen to the bottom.

Hunding wrung his hands. His bellhop uniform was buttoned wrong, like he’d rushed to get dressed this morning. “You didn’t lose it, did you? Oh, I warned you about leaving unattended magic items in your room! I told the cleaning ravens not to touch it. ‘It’s a warship!’ I said. ‘Not a napkin!’ But they kept wanting to launder it with the linens. If it’s missing —”

“Then *you’ll* be held responsible,” Helgi snarled at the bellhop. “Floor nineteen is *your* service area.”

Hunding winced. He and Helgi had a feud that went back several centuries. The manager welcomed any excuse to make Hunding work extra shifts shoveling garbage into the incinerators or hosing out the lindworm warrens.

“Relax.” I pulled out the piece of cloth. “See? Here it is. And, Hunding, this is for you.” I handed him one of my chocolate bars. “Thanks for keeping an eye on my room while I’m gone.”

The bellhop’s eyes turned misty. “Kid, you’re the best. You can leave unattended magic items in your room anytime!”

“Hmph.” Helgi scowled. “Well, then, Magnus Chase, I’ll need you to sign out.” He thrust the clipboard at me. “Read carefully and initial at the bottom of each page.”

I flipped through a dozen pages of dense contract language. I skimmed over phrases like *In the event of death by squirrel attack* and *The proprietor shall not be held liable for off-site dismemberment*. No wonder my friends preferred to leave the hotel without permission. The release forms were brutal.

T.J. cleared his throat. “So, Magnus, maybe while you’re doing that, I could set up the boat? Can I? I’m ready to get this regiment underway!”

I could tell. He was loaded down with enough ammunition pouches, haversacks, and canteens for a thirty-day march. His eyes gleamed as brightly as his bayonet. Since T.J. was usually the voice of reason on floor nineteen, I was glad to have him along, even if he did get a little too excited about full frontal charges on enemy positions.

“Yeah,” I said. “Sure, man.”

“YAY!” He plucked the handkerchief out of my hand and hustled toward the dock.

I signed the release forms, trying not to get hung up on the clauses about arbitration in case we got incinerated in the fires of Muspellheim or got pulverized by frost giants. I handed the clipboard back to Helgi.

The manager frowned. “You sure you read everything?”

“Uh...yeah. I’m a fast reader.”

Helgi gripped my shoulder. “Then good luck, Magnus Chase, son of Frey. And remember, you *must* stop Loki’s ship *Naglfar* from sailing at Midsummer—”

“I know.”

“—or Ragnarok begins.”

“Right.”

“Which means our renovations to the banquet hall won’t ever be complete, and we’ll *never* get high-speed Internet restored on floor two hundred forty-two.”

I nodded grimly. I did not need the extra pressure of being responsible for an entire floor’s Internet connection. “We’ll succeed. Don’t worry.”

Helgi tugged at his beard. “But if you *do* start Ragnarok, could you please get back here as soon as possible, or send us a text?”

“Okay. Um, a text?”

As far as I knew, the hotel staff just used ravens. They didn’t know how to use mobile devices. None of them even had numbers. But that didn’t stop them from talking a good game.

“We’ll need to get everyone started on their checkout surveys before we march off to Doomsday,” Helgi explained. “To expedite their deaths. If you can’t make it back, you can also fill out your survey online. And if you wouldn’t mind marking *excellent* wherever it mentions the manager, I’d appreciate it. Odin does read those.”

“But if we’re all going to die anyway—”

“Good man.” He patted my shoulder. “Well, have a safe—er, successful journey!”

He tucked the clipboard under his arm and strolled off, probably going to inspect those renovations to the banquet hall.

Hunding sighed. “That man has no sense. Thanks for the chocolate, though, my boy. I just wish there was something more I could do for you.”

My scalp tingled with inspiration. During my time at the hotel, Hunding had become my best source of information. He knew where all the bodies were buried (literally). He knew all the secret room service menu items, and how you could get from the lobby to the observation deck above the Grove of Glasir without having to pass through the gauntlet of gift shops. He was a walking Vikingpedia.

I pulled out Randolph’s journal and showed him the last page. “Any idea what this word means?” I pointed to *mjöð*.

Hunding laughed. “It says *mead*, of course!”

“Huh. So it has nothing to do with cows.”

“Pardon?”

“Never mind. What about this name here—Bolverk?”

Hunding flinched so violently he dropped his chocolate bar. “Bolverk? NO. No, no, no. What is this book, anyway? Why would you possibly—?”

“Argh!” Halfborn yelled from dockside. “Magnus, we need you over here, now!”

The river was starting to surge, frothing and lapping over the edge of the canal. T.J. shook the handkerchief desperately, yelling, “How does it work? How does it work?”

It hadn’t occurred to me that the foldable ship, being a gift from my dad, might only work for me. I ran over to help.

Mallory and Halfborn were scrambling to gather their supplies.

“We’ve got a minute at most before the high tide comes flooding through here!” yelled Halfborn. “Ship, Magnus! Now!”

I took the handkerchief and tried to steady my shaking hands. I'd practiced this ship-unfolding trick a couple of times on calmer water, once by myself and once with Alex, but I could still hardly believe it would work. I definitely wasn't looking forward to the results.

I flicked the handkerchief toward the water. As soon as the cloth hit the surface, the corners unfolded and unfolded and kept unfolding. It was like watching the building of a Lego model in a sped-up stop-motion video. In the space of two breaths, a Viking longship lay at anchor in the canal, the turbulent water coursing around its stern.

But, of course, nobody complimented me on its beautifully trimmed hull, or the elaborate Viking shields lining the rails, or the five rows of oars ready for service. No one noted how the mainmast was hinged and folded over so it could pass through this low tunnel without breaking apart. No one gasped at the beauty of the carved dragon figurehead, or praised the fact that the ship was much larger and more spacious than your typical longship, even boasting a covered area belowdecks so we wouldn't have to sleep in the rain and snow.

Mallory Keen's first comment was, "Can we talk about the color?"

T.J. frowned. "Why is it—?"

"I don't know!" I wailed. "I don't know why it's yellow!"

My father, Frey, had sent me the boat weeks ago, promising that it was the perfect vessel to use on our voyage. It would get us where we needed to go. It would protect us on the most treacherous seas.

My friends had been excited. They had trusted me, even when I'd refused to give them a preview of our magical ship.

But why, oh, why had my father made the boat the color of I Can't Believe It's Not Butter!®?

Everything about it was neon, eye-melting yellow: the ropes, the shields, the hull, the sail, the rudder, even the dragon figurehead. For all I knew, the bottom of the keel was yellow, too, and we'd blind every fish we sailed past.

"Well, it doesn't matter now," Halfborn said, scowling at me like it mattered very much. "Load up! Hurry!"

A roar echoed from the upstream tunnel like an approaching freight train. The ship banged against the dock. Halfborn tossed our supplies on deck as T.J. hauled up the anchor, while Mallory and I held the mooring lines fast with all our einherji strength.

Just as Halfborn threw the last sacks, a wall of water burst out of the tunnel behind us.

“Let’s go!” yelled T.J.

We jumped aboard as the wave slammed into our stern, propelling us forward like the kick of a seventy-million-gallon mule.

I glanced back at the dock one last time. Hunding the bellhop stood knee-deep in water, clutching his chocolate bar, staring at me as we rocketed into the darkness, his face bleached with shock as if, after all these centuries of dealing with the dead in Valhalla, he’d finally seen an actual ghost.



## I Have a Nightmare About Toenails

I LIKE my rivers the way I like my enemies—slow, wide, and lazy.

I rarely get what I like.

Our boat shot down the rapids in near-total darkness. My friends scrambled around the deck, grabbing ropes and tripping over oars. The ship rocked from side to side, making me feel like I was surfing on a pendulum. Mallory hugged the rudder with her full weight, trying to keep us in the middle of the current.

“Don’t just stand there!” she yelled at me. “Help!”

The old saying is true: no nautical training survives first contact with the water.

I’m pretty sure that’s an old saying.

Everything I’d learned from Percy Jackson evaporated out of my brain. I forgot starboard and port, stern and aft. I forgot how to discourage shark attacks and how to fall off a mast properly. I hopped across the deck yelling, “I’m helping! I’m helping!” without knowing what to do at all.

We swerved and sloshed through the tunnel at impossible speeds, our retracted mast barely clearing the roof. The tips of our oars scraped against the stone walls, leaving trails of bright yellow sparks that made it look like faeries were ice-skating alongside us.

T.J. rushed past me, heading for the prow, and nearly impaled me with his bayonet. “Magnus, hold that line!” he yelled, waving at pretty much every rope on the ship.

I grabbed the nearest bit of rigging and pulled as hard as I could, hoping I had the right line, or hoping I at least looked helpful while doing the wrong thing.

We bumped down a series of cataracts. My teeth clattered out telegraph messages. Frigid waves crashed over the shields on the railing. Then the tunnel widened and we sideswiped a rock that came out of nowhere. The boat spun a 360. We dropped down a waterfall toward certain death, and as the air turned to cold misty soup around us...everything went dark.

What a fantastic time to have a vision!

I found myself standing on the deck of a different ship.

In the distance, glacial cliffs rimmed a vast bay marbled with ice. The air was so cold, a layer of frost crackled over my coat sleeves. Beneath my feet, instead of wooden planking, spread a bumpy surface of glistening gray and black like the shell of an armadillo.

The entire ship, a Viking vessel the size of an aircraft carrier, was made of the same stuff. And unfortunately I knew what it was—the clipped toenails and fingernails of the dishonored dead, billions upon billions of nasty zombie cuttings, all cobbled together by evil pedicurist magic to create *Naglfar*, the Ship of Nails, also known as the Ship of the Dead.

Above me, gray sails rippled in the freezing wind.

Shuffling across the deck were thousands of desiccated human husks dressed in rusted armor: *draugr*, Viking zombies. Giants strode among them, shouting orders and kicking them to form ranks. Out of the corners of my eyes, I caught glimpses of darker things, too: incorporeal shades that might have been wolves, or serpents, or skeletal horses made of smoke.

“Look who’s here!” said a cheerful voice.

Standing before me, in the white uniform of a navy admiral, was Loki himself. His autumn-leaf-colored hair swept around the edges of his flag officer’s hat. His intense irises glinted like rings of hardening amber, suffocating the life out of his poor trapped pupils. Despite the pitted wreckage of his face, damaged from centuries of snake venom dripping between his eyes, despite the scarred and twisted lips that had once been sewn together by an angry dwarf, Loki grinned in such a warm, friendly way it was almost impossible not to smile back.

“Coming to visit me?” he asked. “Awesome!”

I tried to yell at him. I wanted to berate him for getting my uncle killed, for torturing my friends, for ruining my life and causing me six solid months of indigestion, but my throat was filled with wet cement.

“Nothing to say?” Loki chuckled. “That’s all right, because I’ve got plenty to tell you. First a friendly warning: I’d *really* think twice about

following old Randolph's plan." His expression tightened with false sympathy. "I'm afraid the poor man got a little senile there toward the end. You'd have to be crazy to listen to him!"

I wanted to strangle Loki, but my hands felt strangely heavy. I looked down and saw that my fingernails were growing at unnatural speed, stretching toward the deck like taproots seeking soil. My feet felt too tight in my shoes. Somehow I knew that my toenails were also lengthening, pushing through my socks, trying to escape the confines of my hiking boots.

"What else?" Loki tapped his chin. "Oh, yes! Look!"

He gestured past the hordes of shuffling zombies, sweeping his arm across the bay as if revealing a fabulous prize I'd just won. On the misty horizon, one of the glacial cliffs had begun to calve, sheeting massive curtains of ice into the water. The sound hit me half a second later: a muffled rumble like thunder through thick clouds.

"Cool, huh?" Loki grinned. "The ice is melting much faster than I thought. I *love* global warming! We'll be able to sail before the week is out, so really, you're already too late. I'd turn around and go back to Valhalla if I were you. You've only got a few days to enjoy yourself before Ragnarok hits. Might as well take some of those fabulous yoga classes!"

My rebellious fingernails reached the deck. They wove their way into the glistening gray surface, pulling me down, forcing me to double over. My toenails burst through the tips of my boots. They rooted me in place while dead men's nails began to grow upward like saplings, curling eagerly around my shoelaces, vining their way up my ankles.

Loki looked down at me with a gentle smile, as if watching a toddler take his first steps. "Yes, it's a wonderful week for Doomsday. But if you do insist on challenging me"—he sighed and shook his head like *You crazy kids and your quests*—"then *please* leave my children out of it, will you? Poor Sam and Alex. They've suffered enough. If you care for them at all... Well, this quest will destroy them. I promise you that. They have *no idea* what they'll be facing!"

I fell to my knees. I could no longer tell where my own fingernails and toenails stopped and the ship began. Jagged branches of gray and black keratin tightened around my calves and wrists, chaining me to the deck, encircling my limbs, pulling me down into the fabric of the ship itself.

“Take care, Magnus!” Loki called. “One way or another, we’ll talk again soon!”

A rough hand clamped my shoulder, shaking me awake.

“Magnus!” yelled Halfborn Gunderson. “Snap out of it, man! Grab an oar!”

I found myself back on the deck of our bright yellow ship. We were drifting sideways through a cold, dense fog, the current pulling us to port, where the river fell away into roaring darkness.

I swallowed the wet cement clogging my throat. “Is that another waterfall?”

Mallory dropped onto the bench next to me. “One that’ll send us straight into Ginnungagap and kill us, yeah. You feel like rowing now?”

T.J. and Halfborn took the bench in front of us. Together, we four rowed with all our strength, turning starboard and dragging our ship away from the precipice. My shoulders burned. My back muscles screamed in protest. Finally the roaring sound faded behind us. The fog burned away, and I saw that we were in Boston Harbor, not far from Old Ironsides. Rising on my left were the brick row houses and church steeples of Charlestown.

T.J. turned and grinned. “See? That wasn’t so bad!”

“Sure,” Mallory said. “Except for almost falling off the edge of the world and being vaporized.”

Halfborn stretched his arms. “I feel like I’ve just carried an elephant up Bunker Hill, but good job, all....” He faltered when he saw my face. “Magnus? What is it?”

I stared at my trembling hands. I felt as if my fingernails were still growing, trying to find their way back to the Ship of the Dead.

“I had a little vision,” I muttered. “Give me a sec.”

My friends exchanged wary looks. They all knew there was no such thing as a *little* vision.

Mallory Keen scooted closer to me. “Gunderson, why don’t you take the rudder?”

Halfborn frowned. “I don’t take orders from—”

Mallory glared at him. Halfborn muttered under his breath and went to take the rudder.

Mallory fixed me with her eyes, the green irises flecked with brown and orange like the shells of cardinals’ eggs. “Was it Loki you saw?”

Normally, I didn't get this close to Mallory unless she was pulling an ax out of my chest on the battlefield. She valued her personal space. There was something troubling about her gaze—a sort of free-floating anger, like a fire that jumped from rooftop to rooftop. You never knew what it would burn and what it would leave alone.

"Yeah." I described what I'd seen.

Mallory's lip curled with disgust. "That trickster...We've all been seeing him in our nightmares lately. When I get my hands on him—"

"Hey, Mallory," T.J. chided. "I know you want revenge even more than most of us, but—"

Keen stopped him with a harsh look.

I wondered what T.J. was talking about. I'd heard that Mallory had died trying to disarm a car bomb in Ireland, but beyond that, I knew very little of her past. Had Loki been responsible for her death?

She gripped my wrist, her calloused fingers reminding me uncomfortably of the keratin vines of *Naglfar*. "Magnus, Loki's calling you out. If you have that dream again, don't talk to him. Don't be baited."

"Baited into what?" I asked.

Behind us, Halfborn yelled, "Valkyrie at ten o'clock!" He pointed to the Charlestown waterfront. About a quarter mile ahead, I could just make out two figures standing on the dock—one with a green hijab, the other with green hair.

Mallory scowled back at Gunderson. "Do you have to be so loud, you oaf?"

"This is my regular voice, woman!"

"Yes, I know: loud and annoying."

"If you don't like it—"

"Magnus," she said, "we'll talk later." She stomped over to the deck hatch, where Halfborn had dropped his battle-ax during all the confusion. She scooped up the weapon and brandished it at Halfborn. "You can have this back when you start to behave."

She slid down the ladder and disappeared below decks.

"Oh, no, she didn't!" Halfborn abandoned his post and marched after her.

The ship began to list to starboard. T.J. scrambled back and took the rudder.

He sighed. "Those two picked a terrible time to break up."

“Wait, *what?*” I asked.

T.J. raised his eyebrows. “You didn’t hear?”

Halfborn and Mallory argued so much, it was hard to tell when they were angry and when they were just showing affection. Now that I thought about it, though, they *had* been a little more aggressive with each other the last few days.

“Why the breakup?”

T.J. shrugged. “The afterlife is a marathon, not a sprint. Long-term relationships are tricky when you live forever. It’s not uncommon for einherji couples to break up sixty, seventy times over the course of a few centuries.”

I tried to imagine that. Of course, I’d never been in a relationship, long-term or otherwise, so...I couldn’t.

“And we’re stuck on a ship with them,” I noted, “while they’re working out their differences, surrounded by a wide assortment of weapons.”

“They’re both professionals,” said T.J. “I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

*THUNK.* Below my feet, the deck shuddered with the sound of an ax impaling wood.

“Right,” I said. “And the stuff Mallory was saying about Loki?”

T.J.’s smile melted. “We all have our problems with that trickster.”

I wondered what T.J.’s were. I’d lived with my friends on floor nineteen for months now, but I was starting to realize how little I knew about their pasts. Thomas Jefferson Jr.—former infantryman in the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts, son of the war god Tyr and a freed slave. T.J. never seemed to get flustered, even when he got killed on the battlefield, or when he had to intercept Halfborn Gunderson sleepwalking naked through the halls and get him back to his room. T.J. had the sunniest disposition of any dead person I knew, but he must have seen his share of horrors.

I wondered what sort of ammunition Loki used to taunt him in his dreams.

“Mallory said Loki was calling me out,” I remembered. “And that I shouldn’t take the bait?”

T.J. flexed his fingers, as if he were having sympathetic pains from his father, Tyr, who’d gotten his hand bitten off by Fenris Wolf. “Mallory’s right. Some challenges you should never take, especially from Loki.”

I frowned. Loki had used the term *challenge*, too. Not *fight*. Not *stop*. He’d said *if you do insist on challenging me....*

“T.J., isn’t your dad the *god* of personal challenges and duels and whatnot?”

“Exactly.” T.J.’s voice was as stiff and flat as thehardtack bread he loved to eat. He pointed to the docks. “Look, Sam and Alex have company.”

I hadn’t noticed earlier, but lurking a few feet behind the children of Loki, leaning against the hood of his car in his jeans and teal work shirt, was my favorite supplier of fresh falafel sandwiches. Amir Fadlan, Samirah’s fiancé, had come to see us off.



## We All Drown

“WOW,” SAID SAMIRAH as we approached the dock. “You’re right, Alex. That ship is *really* yellow.”

I sighed. “Not you, too.”

Alex grinned. “I vote we name it the *Big Banana*. All in favor?”

“Don’t you dare,” I said.

“I love it,” Mallory said, throwing Alex a mooring line.

Keen and Gunderson had emerged from belowdecks in an apparent truce, though both sported fresh black eyes.

“It’s decided, then!” bellowed Halfborn. “The good ship *Mikillgulr*!”

T.J. scratched his head. “There’s an Old Norse term for *big banana*?”

“Well, not exactly,” Halfborn admitted. “The Vikings never sailed far enough south to discover bananas. But *Mikillgulr* means *big yellow*. That’s close enough!”

I looked skyward with a silent prayer: *Frey, god of summer, Dad, thanks for the boat. But could I suggest that forest green is also a great summery color, and please stop embarrassing me in front of my friends? Amen.*

I climbed ashore and helped tie up the Big Yellow Humiliation, my legs still wobbly from the rough river ride and my vision of Loki. If I felt this grateful to be back on dry land after only a few minutes of travel, our journey across the sea promised to be tons of fun.

Amir shook my hand. “How are you, J—Magnus?”

Even after all these months, he sometimes slipped and called me *Jimmy*. That was my bad. During the two years I’d been homeless, Amir and his dad had been one of my few dependable sources of hot meals. They’d given me leftovers from their restaurant in the Transportation Building food court.

In exchange for their kindness, I hadn't trusted them with my real name. I still felt guilty about that.

"Yeah, I'm good...." I realized I was deceiving him yet again. "I mean, as good as can be expected given that we're heading off on another dangerous quest."

Samirah nudged my ribs with the butt of her ax. "Hey, don't get him agitated. I've spent the past few days trying to convince Amir not to worry."

Alex smirked. "And I've spent the past few days chaperoning them as she tried to convince him not to worry. It's been *very* cute."

Samirah blushed. She was dressed in her typical travel clothes: leather boots, sturdy cargo pants fitted with two axes, a long-sleeved turtleneck, and a dark green jacket that complemented her magical hijab. The fabric of the headscarf rippled in the breeze, catching the colors from her surroundings and ready to go into full camouflage mode at a moment's notice.

Sam's face, though, seemed a little *off*. Her lips were dry and peeling, her eyes sunken and dull like she was suffering from a vitamin deficiency.

"You okay?" I asked her.

"Of course. I'm fine!"

But I could smell the ketones on her breath—a stale sour scent like lemons left out in the sun. It was the smell of someone who hadn't eaten in a while. I'd gotten used to that on the streets. "Nah," I decided. "You're not okay."

She started to deny it, but Amir interceded.

"Ramadan started two weeks ago," he said. "We're both fasting."

"Amir!" Sam protested.

"Well? Magnus is a friend. He deserves to know."

Alex was working his jaw, trying to bite back his frustration. Of course Alex had known. That's what he'd been talking about at Uncle Randolph's—the reason Sam was having so much trouble focusing on her training. I didn't know much about Ramadan, but I knew a lot about going hungry. It can seriously mess up your concentration.

"So, uh, what are the rules about that?" I asked.

"It will not affect me on this quest," Sam promised. "I didn't want to say anything, because I didn't want anyone worrying. It's just no drinking or eating during daylight hours."

"Or bathing," Amir said. "Or cursing. Or smoking. Or violence."

“Which is fine,” Alex said, “because our quests *never* involve violence.”

Sam rolled her eyes. “I can still defend myself if attacked. It’s only one month—”

“One *month*?” I asked.

“I’ve done this every year since I was ten,” Sam said. “Believe me, it’s no big deal.”

It sounded like a pretty big deal to me, especially in the summer when the days were so long, and we’d be facing all sorts of life-and-death situations that would not wait until after regular business hours. “Couldn’t you, like, take a rain check until after our quest?”

“She *could*,” Amir said. “That’s allowable if you’re traveling, or if fasting would be too dangerous, both of which are true in this case.”

“But she won’t,” Alex chimed in. “Because she is as stubborn as a very devout mule.”

Sam poked Alex in the ribs. “Watch it, brother.”

“Ow,” Alex complained. “What happened to no violence?”

“I was defending myself,” Sam said.

“Hey, you all,” Halfborn called from the ship. “We’re loaded up and ready to sail. What are you gabbing about? Come on!”

I looked at Amir, as well-groomed as always, his clothes spotless and perfectly ironed, his dark hair cut to razor-straight perfection. You’d never guess he was a guy who was probably weak from hunger and thirst. But his facial muscles were more taut than usual. His gentle brown eyes kept blinking like he was expecting a drop of cold water to splash on his forehead. Amir was suffering, but it was from something that had nothing to do with Ramadan.

“Just be careful,” he pleaded. “All of you. Magnus, I’d ask you to watch out for Samirah, but if I did that, she would hit me with her ax.”

“I would never hit you with my ax,” Sam said. “Anyway, I’ll be watching out for Magnus, not the other way around.”

“*I’ll* watch out for Sam,” Alex volunteered. “That’s what family is for, right?”

Amir blinked even more. I got the sense that he still wasn’t sure what to make of Alex Fierro, Sam’s green-haired gender-fluid half-sibling chaperone of doom.

“Okay.” Amir nodded. “Thanks.”

I couldn't help feeling guilty about Amir's anguish. Months ago, when he'd started seeing into Samirah's weird double life as a Valkyrie of Odin, I'd healed his mind to keep him from going insane. Now his mortal eyes were permanently opened. Rather than living in blissful ignorance, he could see the earth giants that occasionally strolled down Commonwealth Avenue, the sea serpents that frolicked in the Charles River, and the Valkyries that flew overhead, bringing souls of fallen heroes to check in at the Hotel Valhalla. He could even see our huge Viking warship that looked like a heavily armed banana.

"We'll be careful," I told him. "Besides, nobody would dare attack this ship. It's way too yellow."

He mustered a faint smile. "That much is true." He reached behind him. From the hood of his car, he hefted a large green insulated pack—the kind Fadlan's Falafel used for deliveries. "This is for you, Magnus. I hope you enjoy."

The scent of fresh falafel wafted out. True, I'd eaten falafel just a few hours ago, but my stomach growled because...well, more falafel. "Man, you're the best. I can't believe—Wait. You're in the middle of a fast, and you brought me food? That seems wrong."

"Just because I'm fasting doesn't mean you can't enjoy." He clapped me on my shoulder. "You'll be in my prayers. All of you."

I knew he was sincere. Me, I was an atheist. I only prayed sarcastically to my own father for a better color of boat. Learning about the existence of Norse deities and the Nine Worlds had just made me *more* convinced that there was no grand divine plan. What kind of God would allow Zeus and Odin to run around in the same cosmos, both claiming to be the king of creation, smiting mortals with lightning bolts and giving motivational seminars?

But Amir was a man of faith. He and Samirah believed in something bigger, a cosmic force that actually *cared* about humans. I suppose it was kind of comforting to know Amir had my back in the prayer department, even if I doubted there was anybody at the other end of that line.

"Thanks, man." I shook his hand one last time.

Amir turned to Sam. They stood a few feet apart, not touching. In all the years they'd known each other, they had never touched. I wondered if that was killing Amir even worse than the fasting.

I wasn't much of a toucher myself, but every once in a while, a hug from somebody I cared about could go a long way. Caring about each other as much as Sam and Amir did, and not even being able to hold hands...I couldn't imagine that.

"I love you," Amir told her.

Samirah stumbled backward like she'd been hit in the face with a giant eagle egg. Alex propped her up.

"I...yes," Sam squeaked. "Also. Too."

Amir nodded. He turned and got into his car. A moment later, his taillights disappeared down Flagship Way.

Samirah smacked her own forehead. "Also? Too? I am such an idiot."

Alex patted her arm. "I thought you were quite eloquent. Come on, sister. Your neon-yellow warship awaits."

We undid the mooring lines, extended the mast, hoisted the sail, and did a bunch of other nautical stuff. Soon we were leaving Boston behind, sailing through the mouth of the channel between Logan Airport and the Seaport District.

I liked the *Big Banana* a lot more when it wasn't bouncing through subterranean rapids or drifting toward inter-dimensional waterfalls. A strong wind filled the sail. The sunset turned the downtown skyline to red gold. The sea stretched ahead of us in silky sheets of blue, and for now, all I had to do was stand at the prow and enjoy the view.

After a long hard day, I might even have been able to relax, except I kept thinking about my Uncle Randolph. He had once sailed out of this same harbor, searching for the Sword of Summer. His family had never come back.

*This is different, I told myself. We've got a well-trained crew of einherjar and the stubbornest, most devout Valkyrie in Valhalla.*

Loki's voice echoed through my head. *Poor Sam and Alex. This quest will destroy them. They have no idea what they'll be facing!*

"Shut up," I murmured.

"Sorry?"

I hadn't realized Samirah was standing right next to me.

"Uh. Nothing. Well...not really nothing. I had a little visit from your dad." I told her the details.

Samirah grimaced. "So the usual, then. Alex has been having visions and nightmares, too, pretty much daily."

I scanned the deck, but Alex must have been below. “Really? He didn’t say anything about that to me.”

Samirah shrugged like *That’s Alex.*

“What about you?” I asked. “Any visions?”

She tilted her head. “No, which is interesting. Ramadan tends to focus the mind and strengthen the will. That could be why Loki hasn’t been inside my head. I’m hoping...”

She let the thought trail off, but I caught her meaning. She hoped her fasting might make it harder for Loki to control her. It seemed like a long shot to me. Then again, if my dad could make me do anything he wanted simply by commanding me, I would’ve been willing to try anything, even forgoing falafel sandwiches, to thwart him. Every time Sam said her father’s name, I heard the rage simmering inside her. She *hated* being under his power.

A passenger jet took off from Logan and roared overhead. From T.J.’s lookout at the top of the mast, he raised his arms and yelled, “WOOHOO!” as the wind ruffled through his dark curly hair.

Being from the 1860s, T.J. loved airplanes. I think they seemed more magical to him than dwarves, elves, or dragons.

I felt clanging and bumping below us—Alex and Mallory, probably, getting all our supplies stowed away. Halfborn Gunderson stood aft, leaning on the rudder and whistling “Fly Me to the Moon.” (Stupid Valhalla elevator-music earworms.)

“Sam, you’ll be ready,” I said at last. “You’ll beat Loki this time.”

She turned to gaze at the sunset. I wondered if she was waiting for dusk, when she could eat and drink and, most important, curse again.

“The thing about that,” she said, “is I won’t know until I actually face Loki. Alex’s training is all about loosening me up, getting me more comfortable with shape-shifting, but...” She swallowed. “I don’t know that I *want* to be more comfortable with it. I’m not like Alex.”

That was undeniable.

When Sam had first told me about her shape-changing abilities, she’d explained that she hated to use them. She saw it as giving in to Loki, becoming more like her father.

Alex believed in claiming Loki’s power as his own. Sam saw her jotun heritage as poison that had to be expelled. She relied on discipline and structure: Pray more. Give up food and drink. Whatever it took. But shape-

shifting, being fluid the way Alex and Loki were...that was alien to her, even though it was part of her blood.

“You’ll find a way,” I said. “A way that works for you.”

She studied my face, perhaps trying to gauge whether I believed what I was saying. “I appreciate that. But in the meantime, we have other things to worry about. Alex told me what happened at your uncle’s place.”

Despite the warm evening, I shivered. Thinking about wolves does that to me. “You have any thoughts about what my uncle’s notes meant? Mead? Bolverk?”

Sam shook her head. “We can ask Hearthstone and Blitzen when we pick them up. They’ve been traveling, doing a lot of—what did they call it? —long-range reconnaissance.”

That sounded impressive. Maybe they’d been networking with their contacts in Mimir’s strange interdimensional mafia, trying to find us the safest course through the seas of the Nine Worlds. But the image that kept coming to my mind was Blitzen shopping for new outfits while Hearthstone stood idly nearby, arranging runes into various spells to make time go faster.

I’d missed those guys.

“Where exactly are we meeting them?” I asked.

Sam pointed ahead. “Deer Island Lighthouse. They promised they’d be there at sunset today. Which is now.”

Dozens of islands dotted the coastline off Boston. I could never keep them all straight, but the lighthouse Sam was talking about was easy enough to distinguish—a squat building with a mast thing on top, jutting out of the waves like the conning tower of a concrete submarine.

As we got closer, I waited to spot the glinting chain mail waistcoat of a fashionable dwarf, or an elf in black waving a candy-striped scarf.

“I don’t see them,” I muttered. I glanced up at T.J. “Hey, you see anything?”

Our lookout seemed paralyzed. His mouth hung open, his eyes wide in an expression I’d never associated with Thomas Jefferson Jr.—pure terror.

Next to me, Sam made a strangled sound. She backed away from the prow and pointed to the water between us and the lighthouse.

In front of us, the sea had started to churn, swirling into a downward funnel like someone had pulled the bathtub plug out of Massachusetts Bay. Rising from the maelstrom were the giant watery forms of women—nine in

all, each as large as our ship, with dresses of foam and ice, and blue-green faces contorted with rage.

I just had time to think: *Percy didn't cover this in basic seamanship.*

Then the giant women fell on us like a vengeful tsunami, plunging our glorious yellow warship into the abyss.



## EIGHT

# In the Hall of the Huffy Hipster

HURTLING TO the bottom of the sea was bad enough.

I didn't need the singing, too.

As our ship tumbled, free-falling through the eye of a saltwater cyclone, the nine giant maidens spiraled around us, weaving in and out of the tempest so they appeared to drown over and over again. Their faces contorted in anger and glee. Their long hair lashed us with icy spray. Each time they emerged, they wailed and shrieked, but it wasn't just random noise. Their screams had a tonal quality, like a chorus of whale songs played through heavy feedback. I even caught snippets of lyrics: *boiling mead...wave daughters...death for you!* It reminded me of the first time Halfborn Gunderson played Norwegian black metal for me. After a few bars, it dawned on me...*Oh, wait. That's supposed to be music!*

Sam and I locked arms on the rigging. T.J. straddled the top of the mast, screaming like he was riding the world's most terrifying carousel pony. Halfborn wrestled the rudder, though I didn't see what good that would do in a downward plunge. Belowdecks, I heard Mallory and Alex getting thrown around, *KA-FLUMP, KA-FLUMP, KA-FLUMP*, like a pair of human dice.

The ship spun. With a cry of despair, T.J. lost his grip and hurtled into the maelstrom. Sam zoomed after him. Thank goodness for Valkyrie powers of flight. She tackled T.J. around the waist and zigzagged back to the ship with him, dodging the grasping hands of the sea giantesses and various pieces of luggage we were shedding like ballast.

As soon as she reached the deck—*BLOOOSH!* Our ship splash-landed and then sank.

The biggest shock was the heat. I'd been expecting a freezing death. Instead, I felt like I'd been dunked in a scalding bathtub. My back arched. My muscles contracted. I managed not to inhale any liquid, but when I blinked, trying to see which way was up, the water was a strange cloudy golden color.

*That can't be good,* I thought.

The deck surged beneath me. The *Big Banana* broke the surface of... wherever we were. The storm had vanished. The nine giantesses were nowhere to be seen. Our ship bobbed and creaked on the placid golden water that bubbled around the hull, exuding a smell like exotic spices, flowers, and baked goods. In every direction rose sheer brown cliffs—a perfect ring about a mile in diameter. My first thought was that we'd been dropped in the middle of a volcanic lake.

Our ship seemed to be in one piece, at least. The wet yellow sail flapped against the mast. The rigging glistened and steamed.

Samirah and T.J. got to their feet first. They slipped and staggered aft, where Halfborn Gunderson was slumped over the rudder, blood dripping from an ugly gash on his forehead.

For a moment, I thought, *Eh, Halfborn gets killed that way all the time.* Then I remembered we were not in Valhalla anymore. Wherever this was, if we died here, we would not get a do-over.

“He’s alive!” Sam announced. “Knocked out cold, though!”

My ears still rang from the weird music. My thoughts moved sluggishly. I wondered why T.J. and Sam were looking at me.

Then I realized, *Oh, right. I’m the healer.*

I ran over to help. I channeled Frey-power to heal Gunderson’s head wound as Mallory and Alex, both battered and bleeding, staggered out from belowdecks.

“What are you fools *doing* up here?” Mallory demanded.

As if in answer, a storm cloud rolled overhead, obscuring half the sky. A voice boomed from above:

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING IN MY CAULDRON?”

The storm cloud descended, and I realized it was a face—a face that did not look happy to see us.

From my previous dealings with giants, I’d learned that the only way to process their immense size was to focus on one thing at a time: a nose the size of an oil tanker, a beard as thick and vast as a redwood forest, round

gold-rimmed glasses that looked like crop circles. And on the giant's head, what I'd taken for a storm front was the rim of the universe's largest panama hat.

The way his voice echoed in the basin, pinging off the cliffs with tinny reverberations, made me realize we were not, in fact, in a volcanic crater. Those cliffs were the metal rim of a huge pot. The steaming lake was some kind of brew. And we'd just become the secret ingredient.

My friends stood with their mouths open, trying to make sense of what they were seeing—all except for Halfborn Gunderson, who wisely remained unconscious.

I was the first to regain my wits. I hate it when that happens.

"Hello," I said to the giant.

I'm diplomatic that way, always knowing the right greeting.

Frowny McHugeface furrowed his brow, giving me flashbacks to my sixth-grade science lesson on plate tectonics. He glanced to either side and called out, "Daughters! Get over here!"

More gigantic faces popped up around the rim of the pot: the nine women from the maelstrom, but much larger now, their frothy hair floating about their faces, their smiles a little too manic, their eyes bright with excitement or hunger. (I hoped it wasn't hunger....It was probably hunger.)

"We got them, Dad!" one of the women squeaked—or it would have been a squeak if she hadn't been the size of South Boston.

"Yes, but why?" their father asked.

"They're yellow!" another giantess chimed in. "We noticed them right away! With a ship that color, we figured they deserved to drown!"

I mentally began composing a list of words that began with *F*: Frey. Father. False. Friend. Frick. Frack. And some others.

"Also," said a third daughter, "one of them mentioned *mead*! We knew you'd want to talk to them, Dad! That's your favorite word!"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Alex Fierro waved his hands like there was a flag on the play. "Nobody here was talking about mead. There's been some kind of mistake...." He hesitated, then frowned at me. "Right?"

"Uh..." I pointed to Samirah, who backed away, out of range of Alex's cutting wire. "I was just explaining—"

"DOESN'T MATTER!" boomed Frowny. "You're here now, but I can't have you in my cauldron. I'm just cooking down the mead. A Viking ship could totally ruin the flavor of the honey!"

I glanced at the bubbling liquid around us. I was suddenly glad I hadn't inhaled any of it.

"Honey?" I asked.

"Don't you *dare* call me that," Alex growled. Possibly he was kidding. I didn't want to ask.

A massive hand loomed over us, and Frowny plucked up our ship by the mast.

"They're too small to see properly," he complained. "Let's scale things down."

I hated it when gigantic people changed the proportions of reality. Instantly the world telescoped around me. My stomach imploded. My ears popped. My eyes expanded painfully in their sockets.

*BOOM! SCRAPE! THUMP!*

I stumbled over my own feet, and found myself standing with my friends in the middle of a vast Viking hall.

In one corner, our ship lay on its side, hot mead still dripping from the hull. The room's walls were columned with dozens of ship keels, soaring hundreds of feet up and curving inward to form the rafters of a peaked ceiling. Instead of planks or plaster filling in the space between the columns, there was nothing except rippling green water, held in place by no physics that made sense to me. Here and there, doors lined the watery walls, leading to other undersea chambers, I guessed. The floor was carpeted in squishy kelp that made me glad I had shoes on.

The hall's layout wasn't much different than your typical Viking party pad. A rectangular feasting table dominated the space, with chairs of carved red coral along either side, and an elaborate throne at the far end, decorated with pearls and shark jaws. Freestanding braziers burned with ghostly green flames, filling the hall with a smell like toasted seaweed. Hanging over the main hearth fire was the cauldron we'd been floating in, though it now appeared much less massive—maybe just big enough to cook a team of oxen in. The pot's polished bronze sides were engraved with designs of waves and snarling faces.

Our host/captor, the frowny-daddy giant guy, stood before us, his arms crossed, his brow knit. He was now only twice as tall as a human. The cuffs of his army-green skinny jeans were turned up over pointy black boots. His suit vest was buttoned over a white dress shirt, the sleeves pushed back to show lots of swirling runic tattoos on his forearms. With his panama hat and

his gold-rimmed glasses, he looked like an agitated Whole Foods shopper, stuck in the express line behind a bunch of people with too many items, when all he wanted to do was purchase his macrobiotic matcha smoothie and leave.

Behind him, in a loose semicircle, stood the nine wave girls—who were not (shockingly) doing the wave. Each giantess was terrifying in her own special way, but they all leered and giggled and pushed each other around with the same level of excitement, like fans waiting for a star to come through the stage door so they could tear him to pieces to show their love.

I recalled my encounter with the sea goddess Ran, who had described her husband as a hipster who liked microbrewing. At the time, the description had been too weird to comprehend. Afterward, it had seemed funny. Now it seemed a little too real, because I was pretty sure the hipster god in question was standing right in front of me.

“You are Aegir,” I guessed. “God of the sea.”

Aegir grunted in a way that implied *Yeah, so? You still tainted my mead.*

“And these...” I gulped. “These lovely ladies are your daughters?”

“Of course,” he said. “The Nine Giantesses of the Waves! This is Himminglaeva, Hefring, Hrönn—”

“I’m Hefring, Dad,” said the tallest girl. “She’s Hrönn.”

“Right,” said Aegir. “And Unn. And Bylgja—”

“Bigly?” asked Mallory, who was doing her best to hold up a half-conscious Halfborn.

“Nice to meet you all!” Samirah yelped, before Aegir could introduce Comet, Cupid, and Rudolph. “We claim guest rights!”

Samirah was smart. In certain polite jotun households, claiming guest rights could get you a free pass from being slaughtered, at least temporarily.

Aegir harrumphed. “What do you take me for, a savage? Of course you have guest rights. Despite the fact that you ruined my mead and you have an insultingly yellow ship, you’re in my house now. We at least have to have a meal together before I decide what to do with you. Unless one of you is Magnus Chase, of course, in which case I’d have to kill you right away. One of you isn’t he, I hope?”

No one responded, though my friends all glared at me like *Dang it, Magnus.*

“Just hypothetically...” I said. “If we had a Magnus Chase, why would you kill him?”

“Because I promised my wife, Ran!” Aegir cried. “For some reason, she hates that guy!”

The nine daughters nodded vigorously, muttering, “Hates him. A lot. Yes, tons.”

“Ah.” I was glad I was drenched in mead. Maybe it would hide the sweat popping up on my forehead. “And where is your lovely wife?”

“Not here tonight,” Aegir said. “She’s out collecting trash in her nets.”

“Thank gods!” I said. “I mean...thank gods we at least get to spend some quality time with the rest of you!”

Aegir tilted his head. “Yes....Well, daughters, I suppose you should set extra places at the table for our guests. I’ll talk to our chef about cooking up those juicy prisoners!”

He waved toward one of the side doors, which swung open by itself. Inside was a vast kitchen. When I saw what was suspended above the oven, it took all my willpower not to scream like a wave giantess. Hanging in two matching extra-large canary cages were our long-range reconnaissance experts, Blitzen and Hearthstone.



## I Become a Temporary Vegetarian

**THAT AWKWARD** moment when you lock eyes with two friends hanging in cages in a giant's kitchen. And one of them recognizes you and begins to shout your name, but you do not want your name shouted.

Blitzen staggered to his feet, gripped the bars of his cage, and yelled, “MAG—”

“—NIFICIENT!” I bellowed over him. “What beautiful specimens!”

I jogged toward the cages, Sam and Alex on my heels.

Aegir frowned. “Daughters, see to our other guests!” He made a sweeping take-out-the-trash gesture toward Mallory and T.J., who were still trying to keep our semiconscious berserker from face-planting in the kelp. Then the sea god followed us into the kitchen.

The appliances were all twice human size. The oven knobs alone would have made decent dinner plates. Hearthstone and Blitzen, looking unharmed but humiliated, dangled over the four-burner cooktop, their cages knocking against a tile backsplash that was painted with *buon appetito!* in garish red cursive.

Hearthstone wore his usual black biker outfit, his candy-striped scarf the only flourish of color. His pale face and white-blond hair made it difficult to tell if he was anemic or terrified or just mortified by the *buon appetito!* sign.

Blitzen straightened his navy-blue blazer, then made sure his mauve silk dress shirt was properly tucked into his jeans. His matching handkerchief and ascot were a little askew, but the dude looked pretty good for a prisoner who was on today's dinner menu. His curly black hair and beard were well

trimmed. His dark complexion coordinated beautifully with the iron bars of his cage.

If nothing else, Aegir should have let him go for being a fellow snazzy dresser.

I used a quick flurry of sign language to warn them: *Don't say my name. A-E-G-I-R will kill me.*

I spelled out the god's name since I didn't know what name sign we might use for him. *Frowny*, *Beer Man*, or *H* for *hipster* were all logical choices.

The god appeared at my side. "They *are* magnificent specimens," he agreed. "We always try to have a fresh catch of the day in case guests stop by."

"Right! Very smart," I said. "But do you normally eat dwarves and elves? I didn't think gods—"

"*Gods?*" Aegir barked a laugh. "Well, there's your mistake, little mortal. I'm not one of those namby-pamby Aesir or Vanir gods! I'm a jotun deity, one hundred percent giant!"

I hadn't heard the term *namby-pamby* since third-grade PE class with Coach Wicket, but I seemed to recall it not being a compliment. "So...you *do* eat dwarves and elves?"

"Sometimes." Aegir sounded a bit defensive. "And the occasional troll or human, though I draw the line at hobgoblins. Too gamey. Why do you ask?" He narrowed his eyes. "Do you have special dietary restrictions?"

Sam, again, was quickest on the draw. "Yes, actually! I'm Muslim."

Aegir winced. "I see. Sorry. Yes, I don't think dwarves are halal. I'm not sure about elves."

"They're not, either," Sam said. "In fact, it's Ramadan, which means I need to break my fast in the *company* of dwarves and elves, rather than eating them or being around anyone who does eat them. It's strictly forbidden."

I was pretty sure she was making that up, but what did I know? I suppose she was counting on Aegir knowing even less about Quranic restrictions than I did.

"What a pity." Our host sighed. "And the rest of you?"

"I'm a vegetarian," I said, which wasn't true, but hey, falafel was a vegetable. I glanced at Blitz and Hearth. They gave me four enthusiastic thumbs up.

“And I have green hair.” Alex spread his hands like *What are you gonna do?* “I’m afraid eating dwarves or elves goes against my beliefs. But I very much appreciate the offer.”

Aegir glowered, as if we were testing the limits of his culinary hospitality. He stared at Blitzen and Hearthstone, now leaning casually against the bars of their cages and trying to look as non-halal as possible.

“So much for the catch of the day,” Aegir grumbled. “But we always do our best to accommodate our guests. *Eldir!*”

He yelled the last word so loudly I jumped and hit my head on the oven door handle.

A side door swung open, and an old man shuffled out of the pantry in a cloud of smoke. He was dressed in a white chef’s outfit, complete with poufy hat, but his clothes seemed to be in the process of combusting. Flames danced across his sleeves and apron. Smoke streamed from his collar like his chest was coming to a boil. Sparks wormed through his gray eyebrows and beard. He looked about six hundred years old, his expression so sour he might have spent that entire time smelling terrible things.

“What is it?” he snapped. “I was preparing my elfish salt rub!”

“We’ll need something different for dinner,” Aegir ordered. “No elf. No dwarf.”

“*What?*” Eldir grumbled.

“Our guests have food restrictions: halal, vegetarian, green-hair friendly.”

“And it’s Ramadan,” Sam added. “So you’ll need to free those prisoners so they can break my fast with me.”

“Humph,” said Eldir. “Expect me to (*mutter, mutter*) short notice (*mutter, mutter*) green-hair-friendly menu. I may have some kelp patties in the freezer.” He tromped back into the pantry, still complaining and smoldering.

“I don’t mean to be rude,” I said to Aegir, “but is your chef on fire?”

“Oh, Eldir has been like that for centuries. Ever since my other servant, Fimafeng, got killed by Loki, which left Eldir with twice as much work and made him *burning* mad!”

A little bubble of hope formed in my chest. “Killed by Loki, you say?”

“Yes!” Aegir frowned. “Surely you heard how that scoundrel disgraced my hall?”

I glanced at Sam and Alex like *Hey, guys, Aegir is another enemy of Loki!*

Then I remembered that Sam and Alex were both children of Loki. Aegir might not like my friends any more than he liked people named Magnus Chase.

“Lord Aegir,” Sam said. “That time Loki disgraced your hall...was that the feast of the gods?”

“Yes, yes,” Aegir said. “A complete disaster! The gossip bloggers had a field day with it!”

I could almost see Sam’s mind working. If she’d been Eldir, steam would’ve been pouring from the edges of her hijab.

“I remember the story,” Sam said. She grabbed Alex’s arm. “I have to pray. Alex needs to help me.”

Alex blinked. “I do?”

“Lord Aegir,” Sam continued, “may I use a corner of your hall for a quick prayer?”

The sea god tugged on his vest. “Well, I suppose.”

“Thanks!”

Sam and Alex scurried out of the kitchen. I hoped they were going to formulate a cunning plan to get us all out of Aegir’s hall alive. If Sam was really just going to pray...well, I wondered if she’d ever tried to say a Muslim prayer in the home of a Norse god (sorry, *jotun deity*) before. I was afraid the entire place might collapse from religious paradox.

Aegir stared at me. That awkward dinner-party silence when you’ve tried to serve dwarf and elf to a vegetarian.

“I’m going to retrieve some mead from the cellar,” he said at last. “Please tell me you and your friends don’t have dietary restrictions against mead?”

“I think we’re good!” I said, because I did not want to see a grown jotun cry.

“Thank the waves.” Aegir dug a set of keys out of his vest pocket and tossed them to me. “Unlock the dinner—I mean the prisoners, would you? Then make yourself...”

He waved vaguely toward the feast hall then stomped off, leaving me to imagine how he might’ve finished that sentence: *comfortable, scarce, a sandwich.*

I climbed the oven and freed Blitz and Hearth from their canary cages. We had a tearful reunion on the front left burner.

“Kid!” Blitzen gave me a hug. “I knew you’d come rescue us!”

“Uh, actually, I didn’t know you guys were here.” I used sign language as I talked, for Hearthstone’s benefit, though it had been several weeks and my hands were slow. You get out of practice fast. “But I’m really glad I found you.”

Hearthstone snapped his fingers for attention. *I’m glad too*, he signed. He patted the bag of runes at his belt. *Stupid cages were magic-proof. Blitzen was crying a lot.*

“I was not,” Blitzen protested, signing along. “You were.”

*I was not*, Hearthstone said. *You were.*

At that point, the ASL conversation deteriorated into the two of them poking each other in the chest.

“Guys,” I interrupted. “What happened? How did you end up here?”

“Long story,” Blitz said. “We were waiting for you guys at the lighthouse, minding our own business.”

*Fighting a sea serpent*, Hearth signed.

“Doing nothing wrong,” Blitz said.

*Hitting serpent on the head with rocks.*

“Well, it was threatening us!” Blitz said. “Then this wave came up and swallowed us!”

*Wave contained nine angry women. Serpent was their pet.*

“How was I supposed to know that?” Blitz grumbled. “The serpent didn’t look like it was trying to play fetch. But that’s not important, kid. We found out some information on our reconnaissance, and it isn’t good—”

“Guests!” Aegir called from main hall. “Come! Join us for mead and food!”

*Put a pin in that*, Hearthstone signed, poking Blitz in the chest one last time.

Back in the days when we were three homeless guys on the streets of Boston, if somebody had called us for dinner, we would’ve come running. Now we trudged over reluctantly. This was one free meal I wasn’t so pumped about.

The nine daughters of Aegir hustled about, setting the table with plates and forks and goblets. Aegir hummed as he fiddled with a rack of mead kegs, each labeled with runes. T.J., Mallory, and Halfborn were already

seated, looking very uncomfortable in their red coral seats, with empty chairs spaced between them. Halfborn Gunderson, more or less conscious now, kept blinking and staring at his surroundings like he hoped he was dreaming.

Over by the *Big Banana*, Samirah finished her prayers. She rolled up her portable rug, had a brief, urgent conversation with Alex, then they both came over to join us. If Sam did have a brilliant plan, I was glad it didn't involve her and Alex turning into dolphins, yelling, *See you, suckers!*, and escaping on their own.

The dining table looked like it had been made from the world's largest mast, cut in half lengthwise and folded out to make two leaves. Overhead, suspended from the rafters by an anchor chain, was a sea-glass chandelier. Instead of candles or electric lights, glowing souls of the dead swirled in oversize sconces. Just to set the mood, I guessed.

I was about to sit down between Blitz and Hearth when I realized there were name tags at the place settings: DWARF. HRÖNN. ELF. HEFRING. GREEN HEADSCARF. I found mine on the other side of the table: BLOND GUY.

Great. We had assigned seating.

A daughter of Aegir sat down on either side of me. According to the name tags, the lady on my left was Kolga. The one on my right...oh, boy. Apparently her name was Blodughadda. I wondered if that was the sound her mom had made on anesthesia after giving birth to daughter number nine. Maybe I could just call her Blod.

"Hi," I said.

Blod smiled. Her teeth were stained red. Her wavy hair was flecked with blood. "Hello. It was a pleasure dragging you under the sea."

"Yeah. Thanks."

Her sister Kolga leaned in. Frost started to form on my forearm. Kolga's dress appeared to be woven from ice shards and slush. "I hope we get to keep them, sister," she said. "They'd make fine tortured spirits."

Blod cackled. Her breath smelled like fresh ground beef just out of the fridge. "Yes, indeed! Perfect for our chandelier."

"Appreciate the offer," I said. "But we actually have a pretty full calendar."

"Where are my manners?" Blod said. "In your language, I am called Blood-Red Hair. My sister here is Freezing Wave. And your name is..." She frowned at my card. "Blond Guy?"

I didn't see how that was any worse than Blood-Red Hair or Bigly.

"You can call me Jimmy," I offered. "In your language that's...Jimmy."

Blod didn't look satisfied with that. "There's something about you." She sniffed my face. "Have you sailed over my bloodred waters in a naval battle before?"

"Pretty sure not."

"Perhaps my mother, Ran, described you to me. But why would she—?"

"Guests!" Aegir boomed, and I had never been happier for an interruption. "Here is my first microbrew of the evening. This is a peach lambic mead that makes a lovely aperitif. I welcome your comments after you try it."

His nine daughters oohed and aahed as Aegir hefted the mead cask and carried it around the table, pouring everyone a serving.

"I think you'll find this has a fruity edge," Aegir said. "With just a hint of—"

"Magnus Chase!" Blod yelled, surging to her feet and pointing at me. "This is MAGNUS CHASE!"



## Can We Talk About Mead?

**TYPICAL. SOMEBODY** says *fruity edge* and immediately my name comes to mind.

Come on, people. A little respect.

The daughters of Aegir shot to their feet. Some picked up steak knives, forks, or napkins to stab, poke, or strangle us with.

Aegir screamed, “Magnus Chase? What is this deception?”

My friends and I didn’t move a muscle. We all knew how guest rights worked. We still might be able to talk our way out of a fight, but once we drew our weapons, we stopped being considered guests and started being the catch of the day. Against an entire family of jotun deities on their home turf, I didn’t like our odds.

“Wait!” I said, as calmly as I could with a woman named Blood-Red Hair holding a knife over me. “We’re still guests at your table. We haven’t broken any rules.”

Steam rolled beneath the brim of Aegir’s panama hat. His gold-rimmed glasses fogged up. Under his arm, the mead cask began to creak like a pecan in a nutcracker.

“You lied to me,” Aegir snarled. “You said you weren’t Magnus Chase!”

“You’re going to break your cask,” I warned.

That got his attention. Aegir shifted the mead cask forward and held it in both arms like a baby. “Guest rights do not apply! I granted you a place at my table under false pretenses!”

“I never actually *said* I wasn’t Magnus Chase,” I reminded him. “Besides, your daughters also brought us here because we mentioned

mead.”

Kolga snarled. “And because you have an ugly yellow ship.”

I wondered if everyone could see my heart beating through my shirt. It definitely felt that strong. “Right, but also mead. We’re here to talk about mead!”

“We are?” Halfborn asked.

Mallory looked like she would have hit him, except there was a sea giantess in the way. “Of course we are, you oaf!”

“So, you see,” I continued, “that wasn’t a false pretense. That pretense was completely true!”

The daughters of Aegir muttered to themselves, unable to counter my flawless logic.

Aegir cradled his cask. “What exactly do you have to say about mead?”

“I’m glad you asked!” Then I realized I had no answer.

Once again, Samirah to the rescue. “We will explain!” she promised. “But stories are better told over dinner, with good mead, are they not?”

Aegir stroked his cask affectionately. “An aperitif, with a fruity edge.”

“Exactly,” Sam agreed. “So, let’s break our fast together. If you are not completely satisfied with our explanations at the end of the dinner, then you can kill us.”

“He can?” T.J. asked. “I mean...sure. He can.”

On my right, Blod’s clawlike fingernails dripped with red salt water. On my left, a miniature hailstorm swirled around Kolga. Interspersed between my friends, the other seven daughters snarled like Tasmanian devil waterspouts.

Blitzen put his hands on his chain mail vest. After getting stabbed by the Skofnung Sword a few months ago, he was a little sensitive about knife attacks. Hearthstone’s eyes flicked from face to face, trying to keep track of the conversation. Lip-reading a single person was hard enough. Trying to read an entire room was nearly impossible.

Mallory Keen gripped her mead goblet, ready to imprint its decorative design on the nearest giantess’s face. Halfborn frowned sleepily, no doubt *convinced* now that this was all a dream. T.J. tried to look inconspicuous as he dug into his pack of firing caps, and Alex Fierro just sat back calmly, sipping his peach lambic mead. Alex needed no preparation for battle. I’d seen how fast he could draw his garrote.

The sea god Aegir was the tipping point. All he had to say was *kill them*, and we were cooked like honey mead. We'd fight ferociously, no doubt. But we would die.

"I don't know..." Aegir mused. "My wife said to kill you if I ever saw you. I was to drown you slowly, revive you, then drown you again."

That sounded like Ran talking.

"Great lord," Blitzen chimed in. "Did you swear a formal *oath* to kill Magnus Chase?"

"Well, no," Aegir admitted. "But when my wife asks—"

"You have to consider her wishes, of course!" Blitz agreed. "But you also have to weigh that against guest rights, eh? And how can you be sure what to do, before you've given us time to tell our whole story?"

"Let me kill them, Father!" growled the daughter with exceptionally big hands. "I will grasp them until they scream!"

"Silence, Grasping Wave," Aegir commanded.

"Let me do the honors!" said another daughter, throwing her plate to the floor. "I will pitch them into Jormungand's mouth!"

"Hold, Pitching Wave." Aegir frowned. "The dwarf has a point. This is a quandary...."

He stroked his keg. I waited for him to say: *My mead cask is angry. And when my mead cask is angry, people DIE!*

Instead, finally, he heaved a sigh. "It would be a shame to waste all this good mead. We will eat and drink together. You will tell me your story, paying special attention to how it relates to mead."

He gestured to his daughters to be seated again. "But I warn you, Magnus Chase, if I decide to kill you, my vengeance shall be terrible. I am a jotun deity, a primordial force! Like my brothers Fire and Air, I, the Sea, am a raging power that will not be contained!"

The kitchen door burst open. In a cloud of smoke, Eldir appeared, his beard still smoldering and his chef's hat now on fire. In his arms was a leaning tower of covered platters.

"Who had the gluten-free meal?" he growled.

"Gluten-free?" Aegir asked. "I don't think we had gluten-free."

"That's mine," said Blod. She noticed my expression and scowled defensively. "What? I'm on an all-blood diet."

"That's fine," I squeaked.

“Okay, then,” Aegir said, taking charge of the orders. “Halal meal—that is Samirah’s. The vegetarian is Magnus Kill-Him-Later Chase. The green-hair entrée—”

“Right here,” said Alex, which was probably unnecessary. Even in a room filled with sea giantesses, he was still the only one present with green hair.

Platters were distributed. Mead was poured.

“Right,” Aegir said, lowering himself into his throne. “Everybody good?”

“Got one left!” Eldir yelled. “The Buddhist meal?”

“That’s me,” said Aegir.

*Don’t stare, I told myself, as the primordial deity uncovered his platter of tofu and bean sprouts. This is all completely normal.*

“Now, where was I?” Aegir said. “Oh, yes. A raging power that cannot be contained! I will rip you all limb from limb!”

The threat would have been more frightening if he hadn’t been waving a steamed snow pea at us.

Alex sipped from his goblet. “Can I just say that this mead is *excellent*? If I’m not mistaken, it has a fruity edge. How do you brew it?”

Aegir’s eyes lit up. “You have a discerning palate! You see, the secret is in the temperature of the honey.”

Aegir began to hold forth. Alex nodded politely and asked more questions.

I realized he was buying us time, hoping to draw out the meal while we thought of amazing things to say about mead. But I was fresh out of mead-related ideas.

I glanced at Blod’s plate. Big mistake. She was slurping away at a large red gelatin mold.

I turned the other direction. Kolga’s meal was a plate of different colored snow cones, arranged in a fan like peacock feathers.

Kolga noticed me looking and snarled, her teeth like chiseled ice cubes. The temperature dropped so fast, frost crystals crackled in my ear canals.

“What are you staring at, Magnus Chase? You can’t have my snow cones!”

“No, no! I was just wondering, uh...what side are you guys fighting on in Ragnarok?”

She hissed. “The sea swallows everything.”

I waited for more. That seemed to be her entire battle plan.

“Okay,” I said. “So, you’re kind of neutral? That’s cool.”

“Cool is good. Cold is better.”

“Right. But your dad isn’t friends with Loki.”

“Of course not! After that horrible flyting? Loki disgraced this hall, the gods, my father, even my father’s mead!”

“Right. The flyting.”

The word seemed familiar. I was pretty sure I’d seen it on the TV screen in Valhalla, but I had no idea what it meant.

“I don’t suppose you’ve heard the name Bolverk?” I asked, pressing my luck. “Or what it might have to do with mead?”

Kolga sneered at me as if I were a fool. “Bolverk was the alias of the mead thief, of course.”

“The mead thief.” That sounded like the title of a really bad novel to me.

“The one who stole Kvasir’s Mead!” Kolga said. “The only mead my father cannot brew! Bah, you’re clueless. I’ll look forward to stuffing your soul in our chandelier.” She went back to enjoying her snow cones.

*Kvasir.* Great. I asked about one name I didn’t know, and I got another name I didn’t know. But I felt like I was getting close to something important—some combination of puzzle pieces that would explain Uncle Randolph’s journal, give me his plan for beating Loki, and maybe even provide a mead-based solution for getting us out of this hall alive.

Aegir continued holding forth about mead-brewing, explaining to Alex the virtues of staggered yeast nutrients and hydrometers. Alex heroically managed to look interested.

I caught Hearthstone’s eye across the table. I signed, *What is a f-l-y-t-i-n-g?*

He frowned. *Contest.* He raised his index finger and twirled it around like he was sticking it up...Ah, yes. The ASL symbol for *insults*.

*And K-V-A-S-I-R?* I asked.

Hearthstone pulled back his hands like he’d touched a hot stove. *Then you know?*

Sam rapped her knuckles on the table to get my attention. Her hands flew in small furious ASL gestures: *Been trying to tell you! Loki was here. Long ago. Insult contest. Have to promise Aegir revenge. Alex and I think there is mead we can use—*

*I got this,* I signaled back.

Amazingly, I felt like I had a plan. Not all the details. Not even most of the details. More like I'd been spun around blindfolded, then somebody had put a stick in my hand and faced me in the general direction of the piñata and said *Start swinging*.

But it was better than nothing.

“Great Aegir!” I jumped up in my seat and climbed onto the table before I could think about what I was doing. “I will now explain to you why you should not kill us, and what it has to do with mead!”

Silence fell around the table. Nine storm giantesses glared at me as if considering all the different ways they could pitch, grasp, hurl, or freeze me to death.

At the edge of my vision, Alex flashed me a message in ASL: *Your fly is open.*

With superhuman willpower, I managed not to look down. I stayed focused on frowning Aegir and the single bean sprout dangling from his beard.

The sea god grumbled, “I was just explaining how to sanitize a fermenter. This interruption had better be good.”

“It is!” I promised, slyly checking my zipper, which was not in fact open. “Our crew is sailing forth to bring Loki to justice! He has escaped his bonds, but we mean to find his ship, *Naglfar*, before it can sail at Midsummer, recapture Loki, and put him back in chains. Help us, and you will have vengeance for that terrible flyting.”

A puff of steam lifted Aegir’s panama hat like the lid of a popcorn popper. “You dare speak of that disgrace?” he demanded. “Here, at the very table where it happened?”

“I know, he flyted you!” I yelled. “He flyted you bad! You and all your godly guests got a *mean* flyting. He even flyted your mead! But we can defeat Loki and pay him back. I—I will challenge Loki myself!”

Sam put her head in her hands. Alex stared at the ceiling and mouthed, *Wow. No.*

My other friends stared at me aghast, as if I’d just pulled the pin out of a grenade. (I did that once on the battlefield in Valhalla before I fully understood how grenades worked. It had not ended well for the grenade or for me.)

Aegir became deadly calm. He leaned forward, the lenses flashing in his golden glasses. “You, Magnus Chase, would challenge Loki to a flyting?”

“Yes.” Despite my friends’ reactions, I still felt certain this was the correct answer, even though I didn’t quite understand what it meant. “I will flyte the heck out of him.”

Aegir stroked his beard, found the bean sprout, flicked it away. “How would you achieve this? Not even the gods could match Loki in a flyting! You would need some incredible secret weapon to give you an edge!”

*Perhaps even a fruity edge*, I thought, because this was the other thing I was sure of, even if I didn’t totally understand it. I stood up straight and announced in my deepest quest-accepting voice: “I will use the mead of Kevin!”

Alex joined Samirah in the bury-your-face-in-your-hands club.

Aegir narrowed his eyes. “You mean the Mead of Kvasir?”

“Yes!” I said. “That!”

“Impossible!” Kolga protested, her mouth dyed six different colors from her snow cones. “Father, don’t believe them!”

“And, great Aegir,” I persisted, “if you let us go, we’ll even...uh, bring you a sample of Kvasir’s Mead, since it is the only mead you can’t brew yourself.”

My friends and the nine giantesses all turned to Aegir, waiting for his verdict.

A thin smile played across the sea god’s mouth. He looked like he’d managed to jump into a newly opened express lane at Whole Foods and finally scored his matcha smoothie.

“Well, this changes everything,” he said.

“It does?” I asked.

He rose from his throne. “I would love to see Loki brought to justice, and in a flyting, no less. I would also love to get a sample of Kvasir’s Mead. And I would prefer not to kill you all, since I did grant you guest rights.”

“Great!” I said. “So, you’ll let us go?”

“Unfortunately,” Aegir said, “you’re still Magnus Chase, and my wife wants you dead. If I let you go, she’ll be mad at me. But if you were to escape, say, while I wasn’t looking, and my daughters didn’t manage to kill you in the attempt...well, I think we’d just have to consider that the will of the Norns!”

He straightened his vest. “I am going to the kitchen to get some more mead now! I sure hope nothing unpleasant happens while I’m gone. Come along, Eldir!”

The cook gave me one last smoldering leer. “Flyte Loki once for Fimafeng, will you?” Then he followed his master into the kitchen.

As soon as the door closed, all nine daughters of Aegir rose from their seats and attacked.



## My Sword Takes You to (Dramatic Pause) Funkytown

**BACK WHEN** I was a regular mortal kid, I didn't know much about combat.

I had some murky ideas that armies would line up, blow trumpets, and then march forward to kill one another in an orderly fashion. If I thought about *Viking* combat at all, I would envision some dude yelling *SHIELD WALL!* and a bunch of hairy blond guys calmly forming ranks and merging their shields into some cool geometric pattern like a polyhedron or a Power Ranger Megazord.

Actual battle was nothing like that. At least, not any version *I'd* ever been in. It was more like a cross between interpretive dance, *lucha libre* wrestling, and a daytime talk show fight.

The nine sea giantesses fell upon us with a collective howl of glee. My friends were ready. Mallory Keen flipped onto Grasping Wave's back and plunged her knives into the giantess's shoulders. Halfborn Gunderson dual-wielded mead goblets, slamming Hefring in the face and Unn in the gut.

T.J. lost valuable time trying to load his rifle. Before he could fire, the lovely Himminglaeva turned into a tidal wave and washed him across the hall.

Hearthstone threw a runestone I hadn't seen before:



It hit Bigly—I mean Bylgja—with a bright flash, liquefying her into a large angry puddle.

Sam's spear of light shimmered in her hand. She flew upward, just beyond reach, and began blasting giantesses with arcs of pure Valkyrie radiance. Meanwhile Blitzen hopped around the chaos, distracting the nine sisters with blistering fashion critiques like "Your hem is too high! You've got a run in your stocking! That scarf does *not* go with your dress!"

Kolga and Blod lunged at me from either side. I valiantly slipped under the table and tried to crawl away, but Blod grabbed me by the leg and pulled me out.

"Oh, no," she snarled, her teeth dripping red. "I'm going to rip your soul from your body, Magnus Chase!"

Then a silverback mountain gorilla crashed into her, knocked her to the floor, and ripped her face off. (That sounds gross. Actually, when the gorilla swiped Blod's face, the giantess's whole head simply dissolved into salt water, soaking the kelp carpet.)

The gorilla turned toward me, his eyes mismatched brown and gold. He grunted at me impatiently, like *Get up, you idiot. Fight!*

The gorilla turned to face Kolga.

I staggered backward. Magic explosions, beams of light, axes, swords, and bad-fashion insults flew everywhere, answered by blasts of salt water, shards of ice, and globs of blood-tinted gelatin.

My gut told me that the giantesses would be much more powerful if they combined forces, like they had when they sank our ship. We were only alive so far because each of the sisters was intent on killing her own target. We had succeeded at being just that individually annoying. If the nine giantesses started singing their weird music again, working together as a team, we would be done for.

Even fighting them separately, we were in trouble. Every time a giantess got vaporized or reduced to a puddle, she quickly re-formed. We were outnumbered nine to eight. No matter how well my friends fought, the giantesses had the home-court advantage—and also immortality, which was a pretty big fruity edge.

We had to find a way to get on our boat and get out of here, back to the surface and far away. For that, we would need a distraction, so I called on the most distracting being I knew.

I pulled the runestone from my neck chain.

Jack sprang into sword form. "Hey, señor! You know, I was thinking about that Riptide girl. Who needs her, right? There are plenty of other

swords in the armory and—WHOA! Aegir's palace? Awesome! What mead is he serving today?"

"Help!" I yelled as Blod rose in front of me, her face reattached, her talons dripping blood.

"Sure!" Jack said amiably. "But, man, Aegir's Oktoberfest Pumpkin Spice Mead is to die for!"

He zipped over to Blood-Red Hair, placing himself between my assailant and me.

"Hey, lady!" Jack said. "Wanna dance?"

"No!" Blod snarled.

She tried to get around him, but Jack was nimble. (Yes, and quick, though I'd never seen him jump over candlesticks.) He swerved from side to side, presenting his edge to the giantess and singing "Funkytown."

Blod seemed unwilling or unable to get past Jack's magical blade, which bought me a few seconds of safety as Jack disco-danced.

"Magnus!" Samirah zoomed by, ten feet above me. "Prepare the ship!"

My heart sank. I realized my friends were playing interference for me, hoping that I could somehow make our ship ready to sail again. Sad, deluded friends.

I ran back to the *Big Banana*.

The ship lay on its side, its mast piercing the wall of water. The current outside must have been strong, because it pushed the ship along the carpet ever so slightly, the keel leaving gouge marks in the kelp.

I touched the hull. Thankfully, the boat responded, collapsing into a handkerchief, which I clutched in my hand. If I could get all my friends together, maybe we could jump through the wall of water simultaneously and summon the ship as the current carried us away from here. Maybe the ship, being magic, would bring us back to the surface. Maybe we wouldn't drown or get crushed by the water pressure.

That was a lot of maybes. Even if we managed it, the nine daughters of Aegir had sucked us under the ocean once before. I didn't see why they couldn't do it again. Somehow, I needed to stop them from following us.

I scanned the battle. Hearthstone raced past me, throwing runes at the giantesses trying to chase him. The ⚡ rune seemed to do the best job. Every time it blasted a giantess, she turned into a puddle for several seconds. Not much, but it was something.

I glanced at the walls of the feast hall, and had an idea.

“Hearth!” I yelled.

I cursed my own stupidity. One of these days, I would get over my habit of yelling for my deaf friend’s attention. I ran after him, ducking past Grasping Wave, who Mallory Keen was driving around the room with her dagger handles like a combat robot.

I grabbed Hearth’s sleeve for his attention. *That rune*, I signed. *What?*

*L-A-G-A-Z*, he finger-spelled. *Water*. *Or...He* made a gesture I’d never seen: one hand horizontal, the fingers of the other hand trickling from it. I got the idea: *drip, leak*. Or maybe *liquefy*.

*Can you do that to the wall? I asked. Or the ceiling?*

Hearth’s mouth quirked, which for him was a diabolical grin. He nodded.

*Wait for my signal*, I signed.

Pitching Wave surged between us, yelling, “RAAARR!” and Hearthstone plunged back into the melee.

I had to figure out how to separate my friends from the giantesses. Then we might be able to collapse part of the feast hall on top of the nine sisters while we made our getaway. I doubted that would hurt our enemies, but it might at least surprise them and slow them down. The problem was, I didn’t know how to break up the fight. I doubted I could blow a whistle and call for a jump ball.

Jack flew back and forth, harassing giantesses with his deadly blade and his even deadlier rendition of a 70s disco classic. Kolga blasted sheets of ice across the carpet, causing Halfborn Gunderson to wipe out. Bylgya fought with T.J., red coral sword against bayonet. Grasping Wave finally managed to pull Mallory off her back. The giantess would have ripped her apart, but Blitzen tossed a dinner plate that smashed the giantess in the face.

(One of Blitz’s unsung skills: he was *killer* at dwarven Ultimate Frisbee.)

Himminglaeva lunged for Samirah. She caught Sam’s legs, but Alex lashed out with his garrote. The giantess suddenly lost several inches around her waistline—actually her *entire* waistline. She crumpled to the floor, neatly bisected, and dissolved into sea foam.

Hearthstone caught my eye. *When the rune?*

I wished I had an answer. My friends couldn’t keep up the fight forever. I considered summoning the Peace of Frey—my super *time out* power that blasts everybody’s weapons out of their hands—but the giantesses weren’t

really using weapons, and I didn't think my friends would appreciate being disarmed.

I needed help. Desperately. So, I did something that didn't come easy for me. I looked toward the watery ceiling and prayed earnestly, not snarkily: "Okay, Frey, Dad, please. I know I sounded ungrateful earlier about the bright yellow ship. But we're about to die down here, so if you've got any help you could send me, I'd really appreciate it. Amen. Love, Magnus. *Magnus Chase*, in case you were wondering."

I winced. I really sucked at praying. I also wasn't sure what help a god of summer could send me at the bottom of Massachusetts Bay.

"Hello," said a voice right next to me.

I leaped about a foot into the air, which I thought was pretty restrained under the circumstances.

Standing at my side was a man in his late fifties, stout, and sun-weathered as if he'd spent decades as a lifeguard. He wore a pale blue polo shirt and cargo shorts, and his feet were bare. His feathery hair and close-cropped beard were the color of honey, flecked with gray. He smiled like we were old friends, though I was sure I'd never seen him before.

"Uh, hi?" I said.

Living in Valhalla, you get used to strange entities popping up out of nowhere. Still, this seemed like an odd time for a casual encounter.

"I'm your grandfather," he offered.

"Right," I said. Because what was I supposed to say? The guy looked nothing like Grandpa (or Grandma) Chase, but I figured he was talking about the other side of my family tree. The Vanir side. Now if I could just remember the name of Frey's dad, I would've been all set. "Hi...Grandpa."

"Your father can't do much in the ocean," said Grandpa Frey-Dad. "But I can. Want some help?"

"Yes," I said, which perhaps was foolish. I couldn't be sure this guy was who he said he was, and accepting help from a powerful being always puts you in their debt.

"Great!" He patted me on the arm. "I'll meet you on the surface when this is all done, okay?"

I nodded. "Mm-hmm."

My newfound grandfather strode into the midst of the battle. "Hello, girls! How's it going?"

The fighting fizzled to a stop. The giantesses retreated warily toward the dinner table. My friends staggered and stumbled in my direction.

Blod bared her red-stained teeth. “Njord, you are not welcome here!”

*Njord! That’s his name!* I made a mental note to send him a card on Grandparents’ Day. Was Grandparents’ Day a thing with Vikings?

“Oh, come now, Blodughadda,” the god said cheerfully. “Can’t an old friend get a cup of mead? Let’s talk like civilized sea deities.”

“These mortals are ours!” growled Grasping Wave. “You have no right!”

“Ah, but you see, they are under my protection now. Which means we’re back to our old conflict of interests, eh?”

The giantesses hissed and snarled. Clearly, they wanted to tear Njord to pieces but were afraid to try.

“Besides,” Njord said, “one of my friends here has a trick to show you. Don’t you, Hearthstone?”

Hearthstone locked eyes with me. I nodded.

Hearth tossed the lagaz rune straight up, past the lost-soul chandelier. I didn’t see how it could reach the ceiling a hundred feet above, but the stone seemed to get lighter and faster as it ascended. It hit the peak of the rafters, exploding into a blazing golden ↑, and the watery roof crashed inward, burying the giantesses and Njord in a million-gallon shower.

“Now!” I yelled to my friends.

We plowed together in a desperate group hug as the wave hit us. My handkerchief expanded around us. The collapsing hall squirted us into the deep like toothpaste from a tube, and we shot toward the surface on our bright yellow Viking warship.



## The Guy with the Feet

THERE'S NOTHING like erupting from the depths of the ocean on a magical Viking ship!

It sucks. A lot.

My eyes felt like grapes that had been lagaz-ed. My ears popped with such force I thought I'd been shot in the back of the head. I gripped the rail, shivering and disoriented, as the *Big Banana* landed on the waves—*WHOMMM!*—and knocked my jaw out of alignment.

The sail unfurled on its own. The oars unlocked, pushed into the water, and began to row by themselves. We sailed under starry skies, the waves calm and glittering, no land to be seen in any direction.

"The ship...is self-driving," I noted.

Next to me, Njord popped into existence, looking no worse for being caught in the collapse of Aegir's hall.

Njord chuckled. "Well, yes, Magnus, of course the ship is self-driving. Were you trying to row it the old-fashioned way?"

I ignored my friends glaring at me. "Um, maybe."

"All you have to do is will the ship to take you where you want to go," Njord told me. "Nothing else is required."

I thought about all that time I'd spent with Percy Jackson learning bowlines and mizzenmasts, only to find out the Viking gods had invented Google-boats. I bet the ship would even magically assist me if I needed to fall off the mast.

"Magnus?" Alex spat a clump of sea giantess hair out of his mouth. Wait. *Her* mouth. I wasn't sure when it had happened, but I was pretty

certain Alex had shifted gender. “Aren’t you going to introduce us to your friend?”

“Right,” I said. “Everybody, this is Frey-Dad. I mean Njord.”

Blitzen scowled. He muttered under his breath, “Might have known.”

Halfborn Gunderson’s eyes widened. “Njord? God of ships? *The Njord?*” Then the berserker turned and vomited over the railing.

T.J. stepped forward, hands raised like *We come in peace*. “Halfborn wasn’t making an editorial comment, great Njord. We appreciate your help! He just has a head injury.”

Njord smiled. “That’s perfectly fine. You all should get some rest. I did what I could to ease your decompression sickness, but you’re going to feel bad for a day or two. Also, you have blood trickling from your nose. Oh, and coming out of your ears.”

I realized he was talking about everyone. We were leaking red like Blodughadda, but at least all my friends seemed to be in one piece.

“So, Njord,” said Mallory, wiping her nose. “Before we rest, are you sure those nine giantesses aren’t going to pop up again any minute and, you know, destroy us?”

“No, no,” he promised. “You’re under my protection and safe for the present! Now perhaps you would give me some time to talk with my grandson?”

Alex picked a last strand of giantess hair off her tongue. “No problem, Frey-Dad. Oh, and by the way, guys, my pronouns are *she* and *her* now. It’s a new day!”

(Hooray for me being right.)

Samirah stepped forward, her fists clenched. Her wet hijab clung to her head like an affectionate octopus. “Magnus, down in the feast hall...do you realize what you agreed to? Do you have any idea—?”

Njord raised his hand. “My dear, perhaps you’d let me discuss that with him? Dawn is coming. Shouldn’t you eat your *suhur* meal?”

Sam gazed east, where the stars were beginning to fade. She worked her jaw muscles. “I suppose you’re right, though I don’t feel much like it. Anybody want to join me?”

T.J. shouldered his rifle. “Sam, when it comes to eating, I always have your back. Let’s go below and see if the galley is still in one piece. Anybody else?”

“Yep.” Mallory eyed the sea god. For some reason, she seemed fascinated by his bare feet. “We’ll give Magnus some family time.”

Alex followed, doing her best to steady Halfborn Gunderson. Maybe it was just my imagination, but before Alex went down the ladder, she gave me a look like *You okay?* Or maybe she was just wondering why I was so weird, as per usual.

That left only Blitz and Hearth, who were fussing with each other’s outfits. Hearth’s scarf had somehow gotten tied around his arm like a sling. Blitzen’s ascot had wrapped around his head like a fancy do-rag. They were trying to help while swatting each other away, thus not accomplishing much.

“Dwarf and elf.” Njord’s tone was relaxed, but my friends immediately stopped their fussing and faced the god. “Stay with us,” Njord said. “We should confer.”

Hearthstone looked agreeable enough, but Blitz scowled even deeper.

We settled on the foredeck, which was the only place where we wouldn’t get tripped by the self-rowing oars, bonked by the boom, or strangled by the magical rigging.

Njord sat with his back to the railing, his legs far apart. He wriggled his toes as if to get them a good tan. This didn’t give the rest of us a lot of room to sit, but since Njord was the god and he’d just saved us, I figured he’d earned the privilege of manspreading.

Blitz and Hearth sat side by side across from the god. I squatted against the prow, though I’d never done well sitting backward in a moving vehicle. I hoped I wasn’t going to become the second crewmember to vomit in the god’s presence.

“Well,” Njord said, “this is nice.”

I felt like my head had been run through a Play-Doh press. I’d been drenched in mead and salt water. I’d barely touched my vegetarian-option meal, and my stomach was devouring itself. Drops of blood from my nose splattered in my lap. Otherwise, yeah. It was real nice.

Sometime during our ascent, Jack had returned to pendant form. He hung from my neck chain, buzzing against my sternum as if humming a message: *Compliment his feet.*

I must have either imagined it or misunderstood him. Maybe Jack meant *Compliment his feat.*

“Uh, thanks again for the help, Granddad,” I said.

Njord smiled. "Just call me Njord. *Granddad* makes me feel old!"

I figured he'd been alive for two or three thousand years, but I didn't want to insult him. "Right. Sorry. So, did Frey send you, or did you just happen to be in the neighborhood?"

"Oh, I hear all desperate prayers spoken at sea."

Njord wriggled his toes. Was it my imagination or was he intentionally showing off his feet? I mean, they *were* well manicured. No calluses. Not a fleck of dirt or tar. Toenails trimmed, buffed to perfection. Zero toe gunk or weird hobbit foot fur. But still...

"I was happy to assist," Njord continued. "Aegir and I go back a long way. He and Ran and their daughters represent the raging forces of nature, the sea's raw power, blah, blah, blah. Whereas I—"

"You're the god of fishing," Blitzen said.

Njord frowned. "Other things as well, Mr. Dwarf."

"Please, call me Blitz," said Blitz. "Mr. Dwarf was my father."

Hearthstone grunted impatiently, the way he often does when Blitzen is about to get himself killed by a deity.

*Njord is god of many things*, he signed. *Sailing. Shipbuilding.*

"Exactly!" Njord said, apparently having no difficulty with Hearth's ASL. "Trading, fishing, navigation—any occupation that involves the ocean. Even farming, since the tides and storms affect crop-growing! Aegir is the nasty, brutal side of the ocean. I'm the guy you pray to when you want the sea to work for you!"

"Hmph," Blitz said.

I didn't know why he was being antagonistic. Then I remembered that his father, Bilì, had died checking the chains that bound Fenris Wolf on his island. Bilì's slashed and torn clothing had eventually washed up on the shores of Nidavellir. No safe homeward voyage for him. Why would Blitzen consider the sea anything but cruel?

I wanted to let Blitz know that I understood, that I was sorry, but he kept his gaze firmly on the deck.

"Anyway," Njord said, "Aegir and his family have been my, ah, *competitors* for centuries. They try to drown mortals: I try to save them. They destroy ships; I build better ships. We're not enemies, exactly, but we do keep each other on our toes!"

He emphasized the word *toes*, stretching out his feet a little more. This was now officially getting weird.

Jack's voice buzzed in my head more forcefully. *Compliment. His. Feet.*

"You have beautiful feet, Grand—er, Njord."

The god beamed. "Oh, these old things? Well, you're kind. Did you know I once won a beauty contest with my feet? The prize was my wife!"

I glanced at Blitz and Hearth, to see if I was imagining this entire conversation.

*Please,* Hearth signed with zero enthusiasm. *Tell us the story.*

"Well, if you insist." Njord gazed at the stars, perhaps recalling his glory days in the foot-beauty-pageant circuit. "Most of the story isn't important. The gods killed this giant, Thjassi. His daughter Skadi demanded vengeance. Blood. Killing. Blah, blah, blah. To prevent further war and stop the blood feud, Odin agreed to let Skadi marry a god of her choosing."

Blitzen scowled. "And she chose...you?"

"No!" Njord clapped his hands in delight. "Oh, it was so funny. You see, Odin only let Skadi choose her husband by looking at the gods' feet!"

"Why?" I asked. "Why not...noses? Or elbows?"

Njord paused. "I never considered that. Not sure! Anyway, Skadi figured the most handsome husband would have the most handsome feet, right? So, we all stood behind a curtain and she went down the line, looking for Balder, because he was always the one everyone thought was the most handsome." He rolled his eyes and mouthed, *Overrated.* "But I had the most beautiful feet of all the gods, as Odin must have known. Skadi picked me! You should've seen the look on her face when she pulled back the curtain and saw who she had to marry!"

Blitzen crossed his arms. "So, Odin used you to trick the poor lady. You were a booby prize."

"Of course not!" Njord looked more startled than angry. "It was a great match!"

"I'm sure it was," I said, anxious to prevent Blitzen from getting turned into a dinghy or whatever other punishment the ship god could deal out. "You two lived happily ever after?"

Njord shifted his back against the rail. "Well, no. We separated shortly thereafter. She wanted to live in the mountains. I liked the beach. Then Skadi had an affair with Odin. Then we got a divorce. But that's not the point! My feet on the day of the contest—they were *amazing*. They won the hand of Skadi, the beautiful ice giantess!"

I was tempted to ask if he only won her hand or the rest of her, too, but I decided against it.

Blitzen stared at me. He twitched his hands like he wanted to sign something ugly about Njord but then remembered that Njord could read ASL. He sighed and stared at his lap.

Njord frowned. "What's wrong, Mr. Dwarf? You don't look impressed!"

"Oh, he is," I promised. "Just speechless. We can all tell that...uh, your feet are very important to you."

*What is your beauty secret?* Hearthstone asked politely.

"Several centuries of standing in the surf," Njord confided. "It smoothed my feet into the perfectly sculpted masterpieces you see today. That, and regular pedicures with a paraffin-wax treatment." He wiggled his shiny toenails. "I was debating about buffing or no buffing, but I think the buffing really makes those piggies shine."

I nodded and agreed that he had very shiny piggies. I also wished I didn't have such an odd family.

"In fact, Magnus," said Njord, "that is one of the reasons I wanted to meet you."

"To show me your feet?"

He laughed. "No, silly." By which, I was pretty sure, he meant yes. "To give you some advice."

"On how to buff his toenails?" Blitz asked.

"No!" Njord hesitated. "Although I *could* do that. I have two important bits of wisdom that may help you on your quest to stop Loki."

*We enjoy bits of wisdom,* Hearth signed.

"The first is this," Njord said. "To reach the Ship of the Dead, you must pass through the borderlands between Niflheim and Jotunheim. This is harsh territory. Mortals can perish from the cold in seconds. If that does not kill you, the giants and draugrs will."

Blitz grumbled, "I'm not enjoying this particular bit of wisdom."

"Ah, but there is one safe harbor," Njord said. "Or at least one *potentially* safe harbor. Or at least one harbor where you might not be instantly killed. You should seek out Thunder Home, the fortress of my beloved Skadi. Tell her I sent you."

"Your beloved?" I asked. "Aren't you divorced?"

"Yes."

"But you're still friends."

“I haven’t seen her in centuries.” Njord got a distant look in his eyes. “And we didn’t exactly part on good terms. But I have to believe she still holds some affection for me. Seek her out. If she grants you safe harbor for my sake, that will tell me she’s forgiven me.”

*And if she doesn’t welcome us?* Hearth asked.

“That would be disappointing.”

I took this to mean: *You will all end up in Skadi’s meat locker.*

I didn’t like the idea of being my grandfather’s test balloon for a reconciliation with his ex-wife. Then again, a potentially safe harbor sounded better than freezing to death in twenty seconds.

Unfortunately, I got the feeling we hadn’t heard Njord’s worst “helpful” advice yet. I waited for the other shoe to drop, even though Njord did not appear to own any shoes.

“What’s the second bit of wisdom?” I asked.

“Hmm?” Njord’s focus snapped back to me. “Oh, yes. The point of my story about my beautiful feet.”

“There was a point?” Blitz sounded genuinely surprised.

“Of course!” Njord said. “The most unexpected thing can be the key to victory. Balder was the most handsome of the gods, but because of my feet, *I won the girl.*”

“Whom you later separated from and divorced,” Blitz said.

“Would you stop dwelling on that?” Njord rolled his eyes at me like *Dwarves these days.* “My point, dear grandson, is that you will need to use unexpected means to defeat Loki. You began to realize that in Aegir’s hall, didn’t you?”

I didn’t remember biting off any clumps of sea giantess hair, but a ball of the stuff seemed to be forming in my throat.

“A flyting,” I said. “I’ll have to beat Loki in a contest...of insults?”

New gray whiskers spread like frost through Njord’s beard. “A flyting is much more than a series of simple put-downs,” he warned. “It’s a duel of prestige, power, confidence. I was present at Aegir’s hall when Loki flyted with the gods. He shamed us so badly....” Njord seemed to deflate, as if just thinking about it made him older and weaker. “Words can be more lethal than blades, Magnus. And Loki is a master of words. To beat him, you must find your inner poet. Only one thing can give you a chance to beat Loki at his own game.”

“Mead,” I guessed. “Kvasir’s Mead.”

The answer didn't sit right with me. I'd been on the streets long enough to see how well "mead" improved people's skills. Pick your poison: beer, wine, vodka, whiskey. Folks claimed they needed it to get through the day. They called it liquid courage. It made them funnier, smarter, more creative. Except it didn't. It just made them less able to tell how unfunny and stupid they were acting.

"It's not merely mead," my grandfather said, reading my expression. "Kvasir's Mead is the most valuable elixir ever created. Finding it will not be easy." He turned to Hearthstone and Blitzen. "You know this, don't you? You know that the quest may claim both your lives."



## Stupid Exploding Grandfathers

“YOU SHOULD have led with that,” I said, my pulse jackhammering in my neck. “Hearth and Blitz do *not* die. That’s a deal-breaker.”

Njord’s toothy smile was as white as Scandinavian snow. I wished I knew his secret for staying so calm. Zen meditation? Fishing? Hotel Valhalla yoga classes?

“Ah, Magnus, you are so much like your father.”

I blinked. “We’re both blond and like the outdoors?”

“You both have kind hearts,” said Njord. “Frey would do anything for a friend. He always loved easily and deeply, sometimes unwisely. You have the proof of that around your neck.”

I curled my fingers around Jack’s runestone. I knew the story: Frey had given up the Sword of Summer so he could win the love of a beautiful giantess. Because he had forsaken his weapon, he would be slain at Ragnarok. The moral of the story, as Jack liked to put it: *Blades before babes*.

The thing was, pretty much everybody would be slain at Ragnarok anyway. I didn’t blame my dad for his choices. If he didn’t fall in love easily, I would never have been born.

“Fine, I’m like my dad,” I said. “I still choose my friends over a cup of mead. I don’t care if it’s pumpkin spice or peach lambic.”

“It’s blood, actually,” Njord said. “And god spit.”

I started to feel seasick, and I didn’t think it was because of the direction I was facing. “Come again?”

Njord opened his hand. Above his palm floated the miniature glowing figure of a bearded man in woolen robes. His face was open and cheerful, his expression caught in mid-laugh. Seeing him, it was hard not to lean forward, smile, and want to hear what he was laughing about.

“This was Kvasir.” Njord’s tone took on an edge of sadness. “The most perfect being ever created. Millennia ago, when the Vanir and Aesir gods ended their war, all of us spit into a golden cup. From that mixture sprang Kvasir, our living peace treaty!”

Suddenly I didn’t want to lean so close to the little glowing man. “The dude was made of spit.”

“Makes sense,” Blitzen grunted. “God saliva is an excellent crafting ingredient.”

Hearthstone tilted his head. He seemed fascinated by the holographic figure. He signed, *Why would anyone murder him?*

“Murder?” I asked.

Njord nodded, lightning flickering in his eyes. For the first time, I got the impression that my grandfather wasn’t just some laid-back guy with nice feet. He was a powerful deity who could probably crumple our warship with a single thought. “Kvasir wandered the Nine Worlds, bringing wisdom, advice, and justice wherever he went. Everyone loved him. And then he was slaughtered. Horrible. Inexcusable.”

“Loki?” I guessed, because that seemed like the logical next word in that list.

Njord barked a short, sour laugh. “Not this time, no. It was dwarves.” He glanced at Blitzen. “No offense.”

Blitzen shrugged. “Dwarves aren’t all the same. Like gods.”

If Njord sensed an insult, he didn’t let on. He closed his hand and the tiny spit man disappeared. “The details of the murder aren’t important. Afterward, Kvasir’s blood was drained and mixed with honey to create a magical mead. It became the most prized, most coveted drink in the Nine Worlds.”

“Ugh.” I put my hand to my mouth. My idea of which details should be left out of a story was very different from Njord’s. “You want me to drink mead that is made from blood that is made from god spit.”

Njord stroked his beard. “When you put it that way, it sounds bad. But yes, Magnus. Whoever drinks Kvasir’s Mead finds their inner poet. The perfect words come to you. The poetry flows. The oration dazzles. The

stories enthrall all who listen. With such power, you could stand toe-to-toe, insult-to-insult in a flyting with Loki.”

My mind pitched and swayed along with my stomach. Why did I have to be the one to challenge Loki?

My inner voice responded, or maybe it was Jack: *Because you volunteered at the feast, dummy. Everybody heard you.*

I rubbed my temples, wondering if it was possible for a brain to literally explode from too much information. That’s one death I’d never experienced in Valhalla.

Hearthstone stared at me with concern. *You want a rune?* he signed. *Or some aspirin?*

I shook my head.

So Uncle Randolph’s notebook hadn’t been a trick. He’d left an actual, viable plan for me to follow. In the end, despite all he’d done, it seemed like the old fool had experienced some remorse. He had tried to help me. I wasn’t sure if that made me feel better or worse.

“What about the name Bolverk?” I asked. “Who is that?”

Njord smiled. “That was Odin’s alias. For a long time, the giants possessed all of Kvasir’s Mead. Odin went in disguise to steal some back for the gods. He succeeded. He even scattered drops of mead around Midgard to inspire mortal bards. But the gods’ supply of the elixir was exhausted centuries ago. The only mead that remains is a tiny portion, jealously guarded by the giants. To get it, you will have to follow in Bolverk’s footsteps and steal what only Odin was ever able to steal.”

“Perfect,” Blitz muttered. “So how do we do *that*?”

“More important,” I said, “why is it so dangerous for Hearth and Blitz? And how can we make it not be?”

I had an overwhelming desire to write a letter for Hearth and Blitz: *Dear Cosmic Forces, Please excuse my friends from their deadly fate. They are not feeling well today.* At the very least, I wanted to outfit them with safety helmets, life jackets, and reflective decals before sending them off.

Njord faced Hearthstone and Blitzen. He signed, *You already know your task.*

He made a stick figure man standing in his palm: *ground*; then two fists, one tapping the top of the other: *work*.

*Lay the groundwork.* At least, I thought that’s what he meant. Either that or: *You farm the fields.* Since Njord was a god of crops, I couldn’t be sure.

Hearthstone touched his scarf. He signed, reluctantly, *The stone?*

Njord nodded. *You know where you must look for it.*

Blitzen broke into the conversation, signing so fast his words got a little muddled. *Leave my elf alone! We can't do that again! Too dangerous!*

Or he could have meant, *Leave my elf in the bathroom! We can't do that wristwatch! Too much garbage!*

“What are you guys talking about?” I asked.

My spoken words sounded jarring and unwelcome in the silent dialogue.

Blitzen brushed his chain mail vest. “Our long-range reconnaissance work, kid. Mimir told us to look for the Mead of Kvasir. Then we heard rumors about a certain item we’d need—”

“Bolverk’s whetstone,” I guessed.

He nodded unhappily. “It’s the only way to defeat”—he spread his hands—“whatever’s guarding the mead. We’re not clear on the who, how, or why.”

Those all seemed like pretty important points to me.

“The thing is,” Blitz continued, “if this stone is where we *think* it is...”

*It's all right,* Hearthstone signed. *We must. So we will.*

“Buddy, no,” Blitz said. “You can’t—”

“The elf is right,” Njord said. “You two must find the stone while Magnus and the rest of the crew sail on to discover the location of the mead. Are you ready?”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” I said. “You’re sending them away *right now*? They just got here!”

“Grandson, you have very little time before Loki’s ship is ready to sail. Only by dividing can you conquer.”

I was pretty sure the old *divide and conquer* saying meant that the divided army *got* conquered, but Njord didn’t sound like he was in the mood for a debate.

“Let me go instead.” I staggered to my feet. I’d just had the longest day in the history of days. I was ready to fall over. But there was no way I was going to stand by while my two oldest friends got sent into mortal danger. “Or at least let me go with them.”

“Kid,” Blitz said, his voice cracking. “It’s okay.”

*My burden,* Hearth signed, both hands pushing down on one of his shoulders.

Njord gave me another calm smile. I was about ready to punch in my grandfather's perfect teeth.

"The crew of this ship will need you with them, Magnus," he said. "But I promise you this: once Hearthstone and Blitz have found the location of the whetstone, once they have laid the groundwork for the assault, I will send them back to get you. Then the three of you can face the true danger together. If you fail, you'll die as a team. How is that?"

That didn't make me yell *hooray*, but I figured it was the best offer I was going to get.

"All right." I helped Blitz to his feet and gave him a hug. He smelled like toasted kelp and Dwarf Noir eau de toilette. "Don't you dare die without me."

"Do my best, kid."

I faced Hearthstone. I put my hand gently on his chest, an elfish gesture of deep affection. *You*, I signed. *Safe*. *Or me*. *Angry*.

The corners of his mouth pulled upward, though he still looked distracted and worried. His heartbeat fluttered under my fingertips like a scared dove.

*You, too*, he signed.

Njord snapped his fingers, and my friends broke into sea spray, like waves crashing against the bow.

I swallowed down my anger.

I told myself Njord had only sent Hearth and Blitz away. He hadn't actually vaporized them. He'd promised I would see them again. I had to believe that.

"Now what?" I asked him. "What do I do while they're gone?"

"Ah." Njord crossed his legs in lotus position, probably just to show off the soles of his wave-sculpted feet. "Your task is equally difficult, Magnus. You must discover the location of Kvasir's Mead. This is a closely guarded secret, known only to a few giants. But there is one who might be convinced to tell you: Hrungnir, who prowls the human land of Jorvik."

The ship hit a swell, jarring my stomach loose from its undercarriage. "I've had some bad encounters with giants."

"Haven't we all?" Njord said. "Once you reach Jorvik, you must find Hrungnir and challenge him. If you beat him, demand that he give you the information you need."

I shuddered, thinking about the last time I was in Jotunheim. “Please tell me this challenge won’t be a bowling tournament.”

“Oh, no, rest easy!” Njord said. “It will most likely be personal combat to the death. You should bring a couple of friends along. I would recommend the attractive one, Alex Fierro.”

I wondered if Alex would be flattered by that or grossed out, or if she’d just laugh. I wondered if Alex’s feet were as well-groomed as Njord’s. What a stupid thing to wonder about.

“Okay,” I said. “Jorvik. Wherever that is.”

“Your ship knows the way,” Njord promised. “I can grant you safe passage that far, but if you survive and sail onward, your ship will once again be vulnerable to attack by Aegir, Ran, their daughters, or...worse things.”

“I will try to contain my happiness.”

“That’s wise,” Njord said. “Your elf and dwarf will find the whetstone you require. You will discover the secret location of the mead. Then you will retrieve the Mead of Kvasir, defeat Loki, and return him to his chains!”

“I appreciate the vote of confidence.”

“Well, it’s more that if you don’t, Loki will flyte you into a pathetic, powerless shadow of yourself. Then you will have to watch all your friends die, one by one, until you alone are left to suffer in Helheim for eternity while the Nine Worlds burn. That is Loki’s plan.”

“Oh.”

“Anyway!” Njord said brightly. “Good luck!”

My grandfather exploded in a fine sea mist, splattering my face with salt.



## Nothing Happens. It's a Miracle

### SMOOTH SAILING.

I never appreciated that term until I'd actually had some. The next two days were shockingly, perversely uneventful. The sky remained cloudless, the winds gentle and cool. The sea stretched in all directions like green silk, reminding me of pictures my mom used to show me from her favorite artist team, this couple Christo and Jeanne-Claude, who worked outside and wrapped entire forests, buildings, and islands in shimmering cloth. It looked like they had turned the North Atlantic into one huge art installation.

The *Big Banana* sailed merrily onward. Our yellow oars churned by themselves. The sail tacked and jibed as needed.

When I told the crew we were going to Jorvik, Halfborn grunted unhappily, but whatever he knew about the place, he wouldn't share. At least the ship seemed to understand where we were heading.

The second afternoon, I found myself standing amidships with Mallory Keen, who'd been acting even more disgruntled than usual.

"I still don't understand why Blitz and Hearth had to leave," she grumbled.

I had a sneaking suspicion Miss Keen had a crush on Blitzen, but I was not brave enough to ask. Every time Blitz visited Valhalla, I would catch Mallory checking out his immaculate beard and perfect outfit, then glancing at Halfborn Gunderson as if wondering why her boyfriend/ex-boyfriend/re-boyfriend/ex-boyfriend couldn't dress so nattily.

"Njord swore it was necessary," I said, though I'd been doing little else but worrying about Blitz and Hearth. "Something about maximizing our time."

“Hmph.” Mallory waved at the horizon. “Yet here we are, sailing and sailing. Your grandpa couldn’t have just zapped us to Jorvik? That would’ve been more useful.”

Halfborn Gunderson walked by with a mop and bucket. “Useful,” he muttered. “Unlike *some* people.”

“Shut up and swab!” Mallory snapped. “As for you, Magnus, I warned you about taking Loki’s bait. And what did you do? Stepped up and volunteered for a flyting. You’re as stupid as this berserker!”

With that, she climbed to the top of the mast, the most solitary place on the ship, and proceeded to glare daggers at the ocean.

Halfborn mumbled as he swabbed the deck, “Redheaded Irish vixen. Pay her no mind, Magnus.”

I wished we didn’t have to make our voyage while the two of them were feuding. Or while Sam was fasting for Ramadan. Or while Alex was trying to teach Sam how to foil Loki’s control. Come to think of it, I wished we didn’t have to make this voyage at all.

“What’s Mallory’s history with Loki?” I asked. “She seems...”

I wasn’t sure which word to use: *Worried?* *Resentful?* *Homicidal?*

Halfborn knotted his shoulders, making the serpent tattoos undulate across his back. He glanced at the top of the mast, as if considering more curse words at Mallory’s expense. “Not my place to say. But being baited into doing something you later regret...Mallory knows about that. It’s how she died.”

I thought back to my first days in Valhalla, when Halfborn had teased Mallory for trying to disarm a car bomb with her face. Her death must have had more to it. She’d been brave enough to attract the attention of a Valkyrie.

“Magnus, you’ve got to understand,” Halfborn said, “we’re both heading toward the places where we died. It may be different for you. You died in Boston, stayed in Boston. You haven’t been dead long enough to see the world change around you. But for us? Mallory’s got no wish to see Ireland again, even if we just sail past its shores. And me...I never wanted to return to Jorvik.”

I felt a pang of guilt. “Man, I’m sorry. Is that where you died?”

“Eh. Not the exact spot, but close. I helped conquer the city with Ivar the Boneless. It served as our base camp. Not much of a town, back in the

day. I just hope they don't still have *vatnavaettir* in the river." He shuddered. "Bad."

I had no idea what *vatnavaettir* were, but if Halfborn Gunderson considered them bad, I did not want to meet them.

Later that evening I checked in on T.J., who was standing at the prow, staring over the waves, drinking coffee, and nibbling a piece ofhardtack. Why he likedhardtack, I couldn't tell you. It was like a big saltine cracker made with cement instead of flour, and no salt.

"Hey," I said.

He had trouble focusing on me. "Oh, hey, Magnus." He offered me a cement cracker. "Want one?"

"I'm good, thanks. I might need my teeth later on."

He nodded as if he hadn't gotten the joke.

Ever since I'd told the crew about my conversation with Njord, T.J. had been quiet and withdrawn, about as close as he ever got to brooding.

He dipped hishardtack in the coffee. "I've always wanted to go to England. I just never thought it would be after I was dead, on a quest, on a bright yellow warship."

"England?"

"That's where we're heading. Didn't you know?"

When I thought about England, which wasn't very often, I thought of the Beatles, Mary Poppins, and guys wearing bowler hats, carrying umbrellas, and saying *pip, pip cheerio*. I didn't think about hordes of Vikings or places called *Jorvik*. Then I remembered that when I first met Halfborn Gunderson, he'd told me he died invading East Anglia. That had been a kingdom in England, like, twelve hundred years ago. Those Vikings really got around.

T.J. leaned on the rail. In the moonlight, a thin streak of amber glowed across his neck—the path of a minié ball that had grazed him during his first battle as a Union Army soldier. It seemed strange to me that you could die, reach Valhalla, get resurrected daily for a hundred and fifty years, and still carry a tiny scar you got in your mortal life.

"Back in the war," he said, "we all worried that Great Britain would declare for the Rebels. The British had abolished slavery way before we did—the Union, I mean—but they needed Southern cotton for their textile mills. The fact that the UK stayed neutral and *didn't* side with the South—that was a huge factor in the North winning the war. It always gave me a

warm feeling toward the Brits. I dreamed about going there someday and saying thank you in person.”

I tried to detect sarcasm or irony in his tone. T.J. was the son of a freed slave. He’d fought and died for a country that kept his family in chains for generations. He even carried the name of a famous slaveholder. But T.J. said we when he talked about the Union. He wore his uniform proudly after more than a century. He dreamed about crossing the ocean to thank the British just because they’d done him the favor of staying neutral.

“How do you always find the bright side?” I marveled. “You’re so... positive.”

T.J. laughed, nearly choking on his hardtack. “Magnus, buddy, if you’d seen me right after I got to Valhalla? Nah. Those first few years were rough. Union soldiers weren’t the only ones who made it to Valhalla. Plenty of Rebels died with swords in their hands. Valkyries don’t care which side of the war you fight on, or how just your cause is. They look for personal bravery and honor.” There. Just a hint of disapproval in his voice. “First couple of years I was an einherji, I saw some familiar faces come through the feast hall—”

“How did you die?” I asked. “The real story.”

He traced the rim of his cup. “Told you. Charging the battlements at Fort Wagner, South Carolina.”

“There’s more to it. A few days ago, you warned me about accepting challenges. You talked like you had personal experience.”

I studied the line of T.J.’s jaw, the tension bottled up there. Maybe that was why he liked hardtack. It gave him something difficult to grind his teeth against.

“A Confederate lieutenant singled me out,” he said at last. “I have no idea why. Our regiment was hunkered down, waiting for the order to charge the battlements. The enemy fire was withering. None of us could move.”

He glanced over. “And then this Reb officer stood up on the enemy lines. He pointed across no-man’s-land with his sword, *right* at me, like somehow he knew me. He shouted, ‘You, n—’ Well, you can guess what he called me. ‘Come out and fight me man-to-man!’”

“Which would have been suicide.”

“I prefer to think of it as a hopeless display of bravery.”

“You mean you *did* it?”

His coffee cup trembled between his hands. The piece ofhardtack in it started to dissolve, expanding like a sponge, brown liquid soaking into the white starch.

“When you’re a child of Tyr,” he said, “you can’t turn down a personal duel. Somebody says *fight me*, and you do it. Every muscle in my body responded to that challenge. Believe me, I didn’t want to go one-on-one with that...guy.”

He’d obviously been thinking of a word other than *guy*. “But I couldn’t refuse. I went over the top, charged the Reb fortifications all by myself. I heard later, after I was dead, that my action triggered the offensive that led to the fall of Fort Wagner. The rest of the fellows followed my example. Guess they figured I was so crazy, they’d better back me up. Me, I just wanted to kill that lieutenant. I did, too. Jeffrey Toussaint. Shot him once in the chest, then got close enough to jab my bayonet right into his gut. Of course, by then the Rebs had shot me about thirty times. I fell in their ranks and died smiling up at a bunch of angry Confederate faces. Next thing I knew, I was in Valhalla.”

“Odin’s undies,” I muttered, which was a curse I saved for special occasions. “Wait...the lieutenant you killed. How did you learn his name?”

T.J. gave me a rueful smile.

Finally, I understood. “He ended up in Valhalla, too.”

T.J. nodded. “Floor seventy-six. Me and old Jeffrey...we spent about fifty years killing each other over and over again, every day. I was so filled with hate. That man was everything I despised and vice versa. I was afraid we’d end up like Hunding and Helgi—immortal enemies, still sniping at each other thousands of years later.”

“But you didn’t?”

“Funny thing. Eventually...I just got tired of it. I stopped looking for Jeffrey Toussaint on the battlefield. I figured something out. You can’t hold on to hate forever. It won’t do a thing to the person you hate, but it’ll poison you, sure enough.”

He traced the minié ball scar with his finger. “As for Jeffrey, he stopped showing up in the feast hall. Never saw him again. That happened to a lot of the Confederate einherjar. They didn’t last. They locked themselves in their rooms, never came out. They faded away.”

T.J. shrugged and continued. “I guess it was harder for them to adjust. You think the world is one way, then you find out it’s much bigger and

stranger than you ever imagined. If you can't expand your thinking, you're not going to do well in the afterlife."

I recalled standing with Amir Fadlan on the rooftop of the Citgo building, cradling his head and willing his mortal mind not to fracture under the weight of seeing the Bifrost Bridge and the Nine Worlds.

"Yeah," I agreed. "Expanding your brain hurts."

T.J. smiled, but I no longer thought of it as an easy smile. It was hard-won, as courageous as a solitary soldier charging enemy lines. "You've accepted your own personal challenge now, Magnus. You're going to have to face Loki one-on-one. There's no going back. But if it helps, you won't be charging those fortifications by yourself. We'll be right there with you."

He patted my shoulder. "Now, if you'll excuse me..." He handed me his coffee-and-hardtack soup like this was a fantastic gift. "I'm off to get some shut-eye!"

Most of the crew slept belowdecks. The *Big Banana*, we had discovered, would unfold as many rooms as we needed to be comfortable, regardless of the exterior size of the hull. I wasn't sure how that worked. Even though I was a *Doctor Who* fan, I didn't feel like testing the limits of our bright yellow TARDIS. I preferred sleeping on the deck, under the stars, which is where I was on our third morning at sea, when Alex shook me awake.

"Let's go, Chase," she announced. "We're running Samirah through her paces. I'm going to teach her how to defy Loki even if it kills us. And by us, I mean you."



## Monkey!

I SAW my problem immediately.

I should never have introduced Alex to Percy Jackson. She had learned way too much from his relentless training methods. Maybe Alex couldn't summon sea animals, but she could turn into them. That was just as bad.

We started with Samirah and Alex fighting each other—on the deck, in the water, in the air. My job was to call out random animals from a stack of flash cards Alex had made. I'd shout, "MONKEY!" and Sam was supposed to turn into a monkey mid-combat, while Alex shape-shifted continually from human to animal to human, doing her best to beat up Sam.

Whenever Alex was in human form, she tossed out taunts like "Come on, al-Abbas! You call that a cotton-topped tamarin? Do better!"

After an hour of combat charades, Samirah's face gleamed with sweat. She'd taken off her hijab and tied back her long brown hair so she could fight better. (She considered us all family, so she had no problem going hijab-less when required.) She leaned against the rail, taking a breather. I almost offered her some water, then I remembered she was fasting.

"Maybe we should take a break until tonight," I suggested. "After dark, you can eat and drink. This must be killing you."

"I'm fine." Sam wasn't a very good liar, but she forced a smile.  
"Thanks, though."

Alex paced the deck, consulting her clipboard. A clipboard, y'all, like she was gunning to be assistant manager at the Hotel Valhalla. She wore green skinny jeans with a pink tank top, the front stitched with an inappropriate hand gesture in glittery sequins. Her hair had started to grow

out, the black roots making her look even more imposing, like a lion with a healthy mane.

“Okay, Magnus, your turn,” she told me. “Get Jack and prepare to fight.”

Jack was pleased to help. “Combat time? Cool!” He floated in a circle around me. “Who are we fighting?”

“Sam,” I said.

Jack froze. “But I like Sam.”

“We’re just practicing,” I said. “Try to kill her without really killing her.”

“Oh, phew! Okay. I can do that.”

Alex had a clicker. Her cruelty knew no bounds. Jack and I double-teamed Sam—Jack attacking with his blade, obviously; me with a mop handle, which I doubt struck terror into Sam’s heart. She dodged and weaved and tried to land hits on us with her ax, the blade wrapped in sail canvas. Sam was supposed to shape-shift whenever Alex clicked her clicker, which she did at random intervals with no regard for Sam’s situation.

The idea, I guessed, was to condition Samirah to change shape whenever, wherever she had to without second-guessing herself.

Jack held back, I could tell. He only whacked Sam a couple of times. Me, I was less than successful with my mop. Combat maneuvering on the deck of a Viking ship turned out to be one of the many important skills I did not have. I tripped over the oars. I got snagged in the rigging. Twice, I bonked my head on the mast and fell into the ocean. About average for me, in other words.

Sam had no such trouble. She left me bruised and battered. The only time I landed a hit was when Alex clicked at a particularly bad time. Mid-lunge, Sam turned into a parrot and flew beak-first into my mop handle. She squawked, turned back into a human, and sat down hard on the deck, a cloud of blue and red feathers fluttering around her.

“Sorry, Sam.” I felt mortified. “I’ve never hit a parrot before.”

Despite her bloody nose, she laughed. “It’s fine. Let’s try that again.”

We fought until we were both spent. Alex called our practice done, and the three of us slumped against the rail shields.

“Whew!” Jack propped himself next to me. “I’m exhausted!”

Since all the energy he expended would come out of *me* as soon as I took hold of him, I decided to let Jack stay in blade form a while longer. I wasn't ready to go comatose until after I had lunch.

But at least I could *have* lunch.

I glanced at Samirah. "This Ramadan thing. I seriously don't know how you do it."

She raised an eyebrow. "You mean *why* I do it?"

"That, too. You really have to endure the fast for a whole month?"

"Yes, Magnus," she said. "It may surprise you to learn that the month of Ramadan lasts one month."

"Glad you haven't completely lost your snark."

She dabbed her face with a towel, which was apparently not forbidden. "I'm more than halfway through the month. It's not so bad." She frowned. "Of course, if we all die before the end of Ramadan, that would be irritating."

"Yeah," Alex agreed. "Loki burns down the Nine Worlds while you're fasting, and you can't even have a drink of water? Ouch."

Sam swatted her arm. "You have to admit, Fierro, I was more focused today. Ramadan helps."

"Eh, maybe," Alex said. "I still think you're crazy to fast, but I'm not as worried as I was."

"I feel clearer," Sam said. "Emptier, in a *good* way. I'm not freezing up as much. I'll be ready when I face Loki, *inshallah*."

Sam didn't use that term much, but I knew it meant *God willing*. Though it obviously helped her, it never inspired much confidence in me. *I'm going to do great, inshallah* was sort of like saying *I'm going to do great, assuming I don't get run over by a truck first*.

"Well," Alex said, "we won't know what'll happen until you're facing dear old Mom-slash-Dad. But I'm cautiously optimistic. And you didn't kill Magnus, which I suppose is good."

"Thanks," I muttered.

Even that little bit of consideration from Alex—the idea that my death might be slightly disagreeable to her—gave me a warm and fuzzy feeling. Yeesh. I was pathetic.

The rest of the afternoon, I helped out around the *Big Banana*. Despite the automatic sailing, there was still plenty to do: swabbing decks, untangling lines, preventing Mallory and Halfborn from killing each other.

The chores kept me from thinking too much about my impending confrontation with Loki, or what Blitz and Hearth might be up to. They'd already been gone three days, and we now had just under two weeks until Midsummer, maybe even less time until the ice melted enough to let Loki's ship sail. How long could it take Blitz and Hearth to find a rock?

Naturally, the idea of searching for a whetstone brought back bad memories of my last quest with Blitz and Hearth, when we'd been trying to find the Skofnung Stone. I told myself there was no connection. This time there would be no brutal Alfheim sunlight, no evil violin-playing *nøkks*, no scowling, sadistic elf father.

Soon, Hearth and Blitz would come back and report on a completely different set of dangerous obstacles for us to overcome! Every time a wave broke over the bow, I watched the sea spray, hoping it would solidify into my friends. But they did not reappear.

A couple of times during the afternoon, small sea serpents swam by—like, twenty-footers. They eyed the ship but didn't attack. I guessed they either didn't like banana-flavored prey or were scared off by Jack's singing.

Jack followed me around the deck, alternating between Abba hits (Vikings are huge Abba fans) and telling me stories about the old days when he and Frey would roam the Nine Worlds, spreading sunshine and happiness and occasionally killing people.

As the day wore on, this became a personal test of endurance: Did I want to return Jack to runestone form and pass out from the toll of our combined exertions, or did I want to listen to him sing some more?

Finally, around sunset, I couldn't stand it any longer. I stumbled aft to where I'd set up my sleeping bag. I lay down, enjoying the sound of Samirah doing her evening prayer on the foredeck, the singsong poetry soft and relaxing.

It seemed strange, the Muslim Maghrib prayer aboard a Viking ship full of atheists and pagans. Then again, Samirah's ancestors had been dealing with Vikings since the Middle Ages. I doubted this was the first time prayers to Allah had been said aboard a longship. The world, the *worlds*, were a lot more interesting because of constant intermixing.

I returned Jack to runestone form and barely had time to reattach him to my neck chain before I passed out.

In my dreams, I got to witness a murder.



## Spit Man Versus Chain Saw. Guess Who Wins

I STOOD with four gods at the crest of a hill, next to the ruins of a thatched hut.

Odin leaned on a thick oaken staff, chain mail glinting under his blue travel cloak. A spear was strapped across his back. A sword hung at his side. His one good eye gleamed under the shade of his blue wide-brimmed hat. With his grizzled beard, eye patch, and assorted weapons, he looked like a guy who couldn't decide whether to go to a Halloween party as a wizard or a pirate.

Next to him stood Heimdall, the guardian of the Bifrost Bridge. Smartphones must not have been invented yet, because he wasn't doing his usual thing of taking pictures every five seconds. He was dressed in armor of thick white wool, with two swords sheathed in an *X* across his back. Gjallar, the Horn of Doomsday, dangled from his belt, which didn't strike me as very safe. Anybody could've run up behind him, blown that horn, and started Ragnarok as a practical joke.

The third god, my father, Frey, knelt next to the ashes of a campfire. He wore faded jeans and a flannel shirt, though I didn't see how those clothes could have been invented yet. Maybe Frey was a medieval beta-tester for REI. His blond hair swept across his shoulders. His bristly beard glowed in the sunlight. If there had been any justice in the world, the thunder god Thor would've looked like this—blond and handsome and regal, not like a muscle-bound redhead fart machine.

The fourth god I had never met, but I recognized him from Njord's holographic show-and-tell: Kvasir, the living peace treaty between the Aesir and Vanir. He was a handsome guy considering that he originated as a cup

of divine spit. His dark curly hair and beard rippled in the breeze. Homespun robes enfolded him, giving him that Jedi-master vibe. He knelt next to my father, his fingers hovering over the charred remnants of the campfire.

Odin leaned toward him. “What do you think, Kvasir?”

That question alone told me how much the gods respected Kvasir. Normally Odin did not ask for the opinions of others. He simply gave answers, usually in the form of riddles or PowerPoint presentations.

Kvasir touched the ashes. “This is Loki’s fire, all right. He was here recently. He is still close by.”

Heimdall scanned the horizon. “I don’t see him anywhere in a five-hundred-mile radius, unless...No, that’s an Irishman with a nice haircut.”

“We must catch Loki,” Odin grumbled. “That flyting was the last straw. He must be imprisoned and punished!”

“A net,” Kvasir announced.

Frey scowled. “What do you mean?”

“See? Loki was burning the evidence.” Kvasir traced a barely discernible pattern of crossed lines in the ashes. “He was trying to anticipate our moves, considering all the ways we might capture him. He wove a net, then quickly burned it.”

Kvasir rose. “Gentlemen, Loki has disguised himself as a fish. We need a net!”

The others looked amazed, like *Holmes, how did you do that?*

I waited for Kvasir to cry, *The game’s afoot!* Instead he shouted “To the nearest river!” and strode off, the other gods hurrying after him.

My dream changed. I saw flashes of Kvasir’s life as he traveled the Nine Worlds, advising the locals on everything from farming to childbirth to tax deductions. All mortal beings loved him. In every town, castle, and village, he was greeted like a hero.

Then one day, after filling out some particularly difficult tax forms for a family of giants, he was on the road to Midgard when he was stopped by a pair of dwarves—stunted, warty, hairy little guys with malicious smiles.

Unfortunately, I recognized them—the brothers Fjalar and Gjalar. They’d once sold me a one-way boat ride. According to Blitzen, they were also notorious thieves and murderers.

“Hello!” Fjalar called to Kvasir from the top of a boulder. “You must be the famous Kvasir!”

Next to him, Gjalar waved enthusiastically. “Well met! We’ve heard wonderful things about you!”

Kvasir, being the wisest being ever created, should have known enough to say *Sorry, I gave at the office* and keep walking.

Unfortunately, Kvasir was also kind. He raised his hand in greeting. “Hello, good dwarves! I am indeed Kvasir. How may I help you?”

Fjalar and Gjalar exchanged glances, like they couldn’t believe their good luck. “Uh, well, you can be our guest for dinner!” Gjalar gestured to a nearby hillside, where the entrance to a cave was covered with curtains of ragged leather.

“We are not interested in murdering you,” Fjalar promised. “Or stealing your stuff. Or draining your blood, which probably has incredible magical properties. We simply want to show you our hospitality!”

“Much appreciated,” Kvasir said. “But I am expected in Midgard tonight. Many humans need my help.”

“Oh, I see,” Fjalar said. “You like...helping people.” He said it the way one might say *You like raw beef*. “Well, as it happens, we’re having a terrible time with our, uh, quarterly estimated taxes.”

Kvasir frowned in sympathy. “I see. Those can be difficult to calculate.”

“Yes!” Gjalar clasped his hands. “Could you help us, O Wise One?”

This was like the part in every horror movie when the audience yells DON’T DO IT! But Kvasir’s compassion overcame his wisdom.

“Very well,” he said. “Show me your paperwork!”

He followed the dwarves into their cave.

I wanted to run after him, to warn him what was going to happen, but my feet remained rooted to the ground. Inside the cave, Kvasir began to scream. A few moments later, I heard a sound like a chain saw, then liquid gurgling into a large cauldron. If I’d been able to throw up in my sleep, I would have.

The scene shifted one last time.

I found myself in the front yard of a three-story mansion, one in a line of Colonials facing a public green. It might have been Salem or Lexington —one of those sleepy pre-Revolutionary towns outside Boston. White-painted columns flanked the house’s entrance. Honeysuckle bushes filled the air with sugary perfume. An American flag fluttered on the porch. The scene was so bucolic it could have been Alfheim if the sunlight had been a little harsher.

The front door swung open, and a skinny figure tumbled down the brick steps as if she'd been thrown.

Alex Fierro looked about fourteen, maybe two or three years younger than when I'd met her. A trickle of blood ran from her left temple. She crawled down the front walk on her hands and knees, her palms shredded from breaking her fall and leaving dabs of blood across the cement like a sponge painting.

She didn't look scared so much as bitter and angry, with tears of frustration in her eyes.

In the doorway of the house, a middle-aged man appeared—short dark hair streaked with gray, pressed black slacks, shiny black shoes, a white dress shirt so crisp and bright it hurt my eyes. I could imagine Blitzen saying *You really need a splash of color, sir!*

The man had Alex's petite build. His face was handsome in the same harsh angular way—like a diamond you could admire but not touch without getting cut.

He shouldn't have been scary. He wasn't big or strong or tough-looking. He dressed like a banker. But there was something terrifying about the set of his jaw, the intensity of his stare, the way his lips twitched and tightened across his teeth as if he hadn't quite mastered human expressions. I wanted to put myself between him and Alex, but I couldn't move.

In one hand, the man hefted a ceramic object the size of a football—a brown-and-white ovoid. I saw that it was a bust with two different faces side by side.

“NORMAL!” The man threw the ceramic sculpture at Alex. It shattered on the walkway. “That's all I want from you! To be a *normal* kid! Is that so damn hard?”

Alex struggled to her feet. She turned to face her father. A mauve skirt hung to her knees over black leggings. Her green sleeveless top had given her arms no protection from the pavement. Her elbows looked like they'd been struck by a meat tenderizer. Her hair was longer than I'd ever seen it, a green ponytail sprouting from her black roots like a flame from Aegir's hearth fire.

“I am normal, *Father*.” She hissed the word as if it was the most twisted insult she could think of.

“No more help.” His tone was hard and cold. “No more money.”

“I don't want your money.”

“Well, that’s good! Because it’s going to my *real* children.” He spat on the steps. “You had so much potential. You understood the craft almost as well as your grandfather. And look at you.”

“The art,” Alex corrected.

“What?”

“It’s art. Not craft.”

Her father waved in disgust at the broken ceramic pieces. “That is not art. It’s trash.”

The sentiment was clear, even if he didn’t say it: *You have chosen to be trash, too.*

Alex glared at her father. The air between them turned dry and bitter. Both seemed to be waiting for the other to make a definitive gesture—to apologize and give in, or to cut the thread between them forever.

Alex got no such resolution.

Her father shook his head in dismay, as if he couldn’t believe his life had come to this. Then he turned and went inside, slamming the door behind him.

I woke with a start. “WHAT?”

“Relax, Sleepy.” Alex Fierro stood over me—*today’s* Alex, wearing a raincoat of such bright yellow I wondered if our ship had begun to assimilate her. The banging sound I’d heard in my dream had been her dropping a full canteen next to my head. She lobbed an apple at my chest.

“Breakfast,” she said. “And also lunch.”

I rubbed my eyes. I could still hear the voice of her father and smell the honeysuckle in their front yard. “How long was I out?”

“About sixteen hours,” she said. “You didn’t miss much, so we let you sleep. But now it’s time.”

“For what?”

I sat up in my sleeping bag. My friends moved around the deck, tying off lines and securing the oars. Cold drizzle hung in the air. Our longship was moored at a stone embankment, on a river lined with brick town houses not too different than those back home in Boston.

“Welcome to Jorvik.” Halfborn glowered. “Or as you modern folk call it, York, England.”



## We Are Ambushed by a Pile of Rocks

IN CASE you're wondering, Old York looks absolutely nothing like New York.

It looks older.

Magnus Chase, master of description. You're welcome.

Halfborn wasn't thrilled to be back at his old base camp. "No self-respecting Viking city should be so far from the sea," he grumbled. "I don't know why Ivar the Boneless even bothered with this place. We wasted all morning sailing here—about twenty-five miles up the River Ouse!"

"The River Ooze?" I asked.

"Ouse," T.J. corrected, breaking into a grin. "It rhymes with *moose*. I read about it in a travel guide!"

I shuddered. Nothing good rhymes with *moose*. *Excuse*. *Noose*. *Caboose*. I also found it disturbing that T.J. had done so much research on England. Then again, a hundred and fifty years is a long time to hang around Valhalla, and the hotel library *is* impressive.

I glanced over the port side. Murky green water curled and swelled around our hull, the rain stippling the surface of the river with overlapping bull's eyes. The current seemed too alive, too *awake*. No matter how much Percy Jackson had trained me, I did not want to fall in there.

"You sense them, don't you?" Halfborn gripped his ax as if ready to cut loose on the Ouse. "The vatnavaettir."

Halfborn said the word as if he found it truly awful—like *cowardice* or *beard trimmer*. "What are they?" I asked.

"And do they have a more pronounceable name?" Alex added.

“They’re nature spirits,” Mallory said. “We have similar legends in Ireland. We call them *each-uisce*—water horses.”

Halfborn snorted. “You Irish have similar legends because you got them from the Norse.”

“Lies,” Mallory growled. “The Celts were in Ireland *long* before you louts invaded.”

“*Louts*? The Viking kingdom of Dublin was the only power worth mentioning on your miserable island!”

“Anyway...” Samirah stepped between the two lovebirds. “Why are these water horses dangerous?”

Halfborn frowned. “Well, they can form a herd and, if they get riled up, stampede and destroy our ship. I imagine they’ve only held off this long because they’re not sure what to make of us being bright yellow. Also, if anyone is foolish enough to touch them—”

“They’ll adhere to your skin,” Mallory said, “drag you under, and drown you.”

Her words made my stomach clench. I’d once gotten myself adhered to a magical eagle that proceeded to take me on a demolition-derby tour over the rooftops of Boston. The idea of being dragged into the Ouse sounded even less fun.

Alex threw her arms around Mallory and Halfborn. “Well, then. It sounds like you two are the water-horse experts. You should stay on board and defend the *Big Banana* while the rest of us go giant hunting!”

“Uh,” I said. “I can just turn the ship into a handkerchief—”

“Oh, no!” Halfborn said. “I have *no* desire to set foot in Jorvik again. I wouldn’t be of any use to you, anyway. Place has changed a bit in twelve hundred years. I’ll stay on the ship, but I don’t need *Mallory’s* help defending it.”

“You think not?” Mallory glared up at him, her hands on the hilts of her knives. “Do you know any Gaelic songs for calming water horses? I’m not leaving this ship in *your* care.”

“Well, I’m not leaving it in *your* care!”

“Guys!” Samirah raised her hands like a boxing referee. She’d never been much of a curser, but I got the sense she was struggling with the Ramadan *no cursing* rule again. Funny how that works: as soon as you’re told you can’t do something, you have the overwhelming desire to do it.

“If you both insist on staying aboard,” she said, “I’ll stay, too. I’m good with horses. I can fly if I get in trouble. And in a pinch”—she flicked her wrist, telescoping her spear of light into existence—“I can blast anything that attacks us. Or I can blast the two of you, if you don’t behave.”

Halfborn and Mallory looked equally unhappy about that arrangement, which meant it was a good compromise.

“You heard the lady,” Alex said. “The landing party will consist of me, T.J., and Blond Guy.”

“Excellent!” T.J. rubbed his hands. “I can’t wait to thank the British!”

T.J. wasn’t kidding.

As we walked the narrow streets of York in a cold gray drizzle, he greeted everyone he saw and tried to shake hands.

“Hello!” he said. “I’m from Boston. Thank you for not supporting the Confederacy!”

The reactions of the locals ranged from “Eh?” to “Leave off!” to some phrases so colorful I wondered if the speakers had descended from Halfborn Gunderson.

T.J. wasn’t deterred. He strolled along, waving and pointing. “Anything you guys need!” he offered. “I owe you.” He grinned at me. “I love this place. The people are so friendly.”

“Uh-huh.” I scanned the low rooftops, figuring that if there was a giant in this city, I should be able to spot him. “So, if you were a jotun in York, where would you be hiding?”

Alex stopped in front of a collection of street signs. With her green hair sticking out of the hood of her yellow raincoat, she looked like a punk spokesperson for frozen fish sticks. “Maybe we could start there.” She pointed at the top sign. “The Jorvik Viking Centre.”

It sounded like as good a plan as any, especially since we had no other plans.

We followed the signs, winding our way through narrow crooked streets lined with brick town houses, pubs, and storefronts. It could have been the North End of Boston, except York was even more of a historical patchwork. Victorian brick butted up against medieval stone, which butted up against black-and-white Elizabethan magpie, which butted up against a tanning salon offering twenty minutes for five pounds.

We passed only a few people. Traffic was light. I wondered if it was a holiday, or if the locals had heard about the bright yellow Viking ship invading the Ouse and had run for the hills.

I decided it was just as well. If there'd been more English folk to meet and greet, T.J. would have really slowed us down.

We made our way down a street called the Shambles, which struck me as an honest description but poor branding. The road itself was just wide enough for a bicycle, assuming the rider was skinny. The houses overhung the sidewalk at fun-house-mirror angles, each story a little wider than the one below it, giving the impression that the entire neighborhood would collapse in on itself if we took one wrong step. I barely breathed until we emerged onto a wider avenue.

Finally, the signs led us to a pedestrian shopping area, where a squat brick building was festooned with green banners: VIKINGS! LIVING HISTORY! THRILLS! FULL INTERACTIVE EXPERIENCE!

All of which sounded pretty good, except for the sign across the front entrance: CLOSED.

“Huh.” T.J. rattled the door handle. “Should we break in?”

I didn't see what good that would do. The place was obviously a museum for tourists. No matter how good this interactive experience was, it would be a letdown after actually living in Valhalla. I didn't need any Viking paraphernalia from the gift shop, either. My runestone pendant/talking sword was as much as I could handle.

“Guys,” Alex said, her voice tight. “Did that wall just move?”

I followed her gaze. Across the pedestrian plaza, jutting from the side of a Tesco Express grocery store, was a crumbling section of rough-hewn limestone blocks that might have been part of a castle or the old city walls.

At least that's what I thought, until the pile of limestone shifted.

A few times, I had watched Samirah emerge from beneath her camouflage hijab—it would look like she had stepped out of a tree trunk or a plain white wall or the display case at a Dunkin' Donuts. This sight gave me a similar kind of vertigo.

My mind had to reprocess what I was looking at: not a section of ruined wall, but a giant, twenty feet tall, whose appearance perfectly mimicked limestone. His rough brown-and-beige skin was beaded like a Gila monster's. A flocking of rubble crusted his long shaggy hair and beard. He wore a tunic and leggings of quilted heavy canvas, giving him that fortress-

wall look. Why he'd been leaning against the grocery store, I had no idea. Dozing? Panhandling? Did giants panhandle?

He fixed us with his amber eyes—the only part of him that seemed truly alive.

"Well, well," rumbled the giant. "I've been waiting ages for Vikings to appear at the Viking Centre. Can't wait to kill you!"

"Good idea, Alex," I squeaked. "Let's follow the signs to the Viking Centre. Yay."

For once, she had no scathing comeback. She stared at the giant, her mouth hanging open, her raincoat hood slipping back from her head.

T.J.'s rifle quivered in his hands like a dowsing rod.

I didn't feel much braver. Sure, I'd seen taller giants. I'd seen eagle giants, fire giants, drunk giants, and giants in gaudy bowling shirts. But I'd never had a stone giant appear right in front of me and cheerfully offer to kill me.

Standing upright, his shoulders were level with the two-story rooftops around us. The few pedestrians on the streets simply walked around him as if he were an inconvenient construction project.

He grabbed the nearest telephone pole and yanked it out of the ground along with a large circular chunk of pavement. Only when he rested the pole across his shoulder did I realize it was his weapon—a maul with a head the size of a hot tub.

"Vikings used to be more social," he rumbled. "I thought surely they'd come to their community center for trials by combat. Or at least for bingo! But you're the first ones I've seen in..." He tilted his shaggy head, a gesture that looked like an avalanche of sheepdogs. "How long *was* I sitting there? I must have dozed off! Ah, well. Tell me your names, warriors. I would like to know who I am killing."

At that point, I would have screamed *I claim guest rights!* But, sadly, we were not inside the giant's home. I doubted guest rights would apply on a public street in a human city.

"Are you the giant Hrungnir?" I asked, hoping I sounded more confident than panic-stricken. "I'm Magnus Chase. This is Thomas Jefferson Jr. and Alex Fierro. We're here to bargain with you!"

The shaggy stone colossus looked from side to side. "Of course I am Hrungnir! Do you see any other giants around? I'm afraid killing you is

nonnegotiable, little einherji, but we can haggle about the details, if you like.”

I gulped. “How did you know we’re einherjar?”

Hrungnir grinned, his teeth like the crenellations of a castle turret. “You *smell* like einherjar! Now, come. What were you hoping to bargain for—a quick death? A death by squeezing? Perhaps a lovely death by stomping followed by being scraped off the bottom of my shoe!”

I glanced at T.J., who shook his head vigorously like *Not the shoe!*

Alex still hadn’t moved. I only knew she was still alive because she blinked the rain out of her eyes.

“O Large and Beige Hrungnir,” I said, “we seek the location of Kvasir’s Mead!”

Hrungnir scowled, his rocky eyebrows furrowing, his brick-like lips forming a segmental arch. “Well, well. Playing Odin’s thievery game, are you? The old Bolverk trick?”

“Uh...maybe.”

Hrungnir chuckled. “I could give you that information. I was with Baugi and Suttung when they sequestered the mead in its new hiding place.”

“Right.” I silently added *Baugi* and *Suttung* to my mental list of Things I Am Clueless About. “That’s what we have come to bargain for. The location of the mead!”

I realized I had already said that. “What is your price, O Beige One?”

Hrungnir stroked his beard, causing rubble and dust to sift down the front of his tunic. “For me to consider such a trade, your deaths would have to be very entertaining.” He studied T.J., then me. His eyes came to rest on Alex Fierro. “Ah. This one smells of clay! You have the necessary skills, do you not?”

I glanced at Alex. “Necessary skills?”

“Eep,” Alex said.

“Excellent!” Hrungnir boomed. “It’s been centuries since the stone giants found a worthy opponent for a traditional two-on-two duel! A fight to the death! Shall we say tomorrow at dawn?”

“Whoa,” I said. “Couldn’t we do a healing contest?”

“Or bingo,” T.J. offered. “Bingo is good.”

“No!” Hrungnir cried. “My very name means *brawler*, little einherji. You won’t cheat me out of a good fight! We will follow the ancient rules of combat. Me versus...Hmm.”

I didn't want to volunteer, but I'd seen Jack take down bigger giants than this guy before. I raised my hand. "Very well, I—"

"No, you're too scrawny." Hrungnir pointed to T.J. "I challenge him!"

"I ACCEPT!" T.J. yelled.

Then he blinked, as if thinking *Thanks a lot, Dad.*

"Good, good," the giant said. "And my second will fight your second, who will be made by her!"

Alex staggered back as if she'd been pushed. "I—I can't. I've never—"

"Or I can just kill all three of you now," Hrungnir said. "Then you'll have *no* chance of finding Kvasir's Mead."

My mouth felt as dusty as the giant's beard. "Alex, what's he talking about? What are you supposed to make?"

By the trapped look in her eyes, I could tell she understood Hrungnir's demand. I'd only seen her this panicked once before—on her first day in Valhalla, when she thought she might be stuck in one gender for the rest of eternity.

"I—" She licked her lips. "All right. I'll do it."

"That's the spirit!" Hrungnir said. "As for the little blond guy here, I guess he can be your water boy or something. Well, I'm off to make my second. You should do the same. I will meet you tomorrow, at dawn, at Konungsgurtha!"

The giant turned and strode through the streets of York, pedestrians moving out of his way as if he were a veering bus.

I turned to Alex. "Explain. What did you just agree to?"

The contrast between her heterochromatic eyes seemed even greater than usual, as if the gold and the brown were separating, pooling to the left and right.

"We need to find a pottery studio," she said. "Fast."

## I Roll Play-Doh to the Death

YOU DON'T hear heroes say that a lot.

*Quick, Boy Wonder! To the pottery studio!*

But Alex's tone left no doubt it was a matter of life and death. The nearest ceramics workshop—a place called the Earthery—turned out to be on my favorite street, the Shambles. I didn't see that as a good omen. While T.J. and I waited outside, Alex spent a few minutes talking with the proprietor, who at last emerged, grinning and holding a large wad of multicolored money. "Have fun, lads!" he said as he hurried down the street. "Brilliant! Ta!"

"Thank you!" T.J. waved. "And thanks for not getting involved in our Civil War!"

We headed inside, where Alex was taking inventory—worktables, potter's wheels, metal shelves lined with half-finished pots, tubs filled with tools, a cabinet stacked with slabs of wet clay in plastic bags. In the back of the studio, one door led to a small bathroom, another to what looked like a storage room.

"This might work," Alex muttered. "Maybe."

"Did you buy this place?" I asked.

"Don't be silly. I just paid the owner for twenty-four hours' exclusive use. But I paid well."

"In British pounds," I noted. "Where'd you get so much local cash?"

She shrugged, her attention on counting bags of clay. "It's called preparation, Chase. I figured we'd be traveling through the UK and Scandinavia. I brought euros, kronor, kroner, and pounds. Compliments of my family. And by *compliments*, I mean I stole it."

I remembered my dream of Alex in front of her house, the way she'd snarled *I don't want your money*. Maybe she'd meant she only wanted it on her terms. I could respect that. But how she'd gotten so many different currencies, I couldn't guess.

"Stop gawping and help me," she ordered.

"I'm not—I wasn't gawping."

"We need to push these tables together," she said. "T.J., go see if there's more clay in the back. We need a *lot* more."

"On it!" T.J. dashed to the supply room.

Alex and I moved four tables together, making a work surface big enough to play Ping-Pong on. T.J. hauled out extra bags of clay until I estimated we had an adequate amount to make a ceramic Volkswagen.

Alex looked back and forth between the clay and the potter's wheels. She tapped her thumbnail nervously against her teeth. "Not enough time," she muttered. "Drying, glazing, firing—"

"Alex," I said. "If you want us to help you, you're going to have to explain what we're doing."

T.J. edged away from me, in case Alex brought out the garrote.

She just glared at me. "You would *know* what I'm doing if you'd taken Pottery 101 in Valhalla with me like I asked you."

"I—I had a scheduling conflict." In fact, I hadn't liked the idea of pottery to the death, especially if it involved getting thrown in a fiery kiln.

"Stone giants have a tradition called *tveirvigi*," said Alex. "Double combat."

"It's like Viking single combat, *einvigi*," T.J. added. "Except with *tveir* instead of *ein*."

"Fascinating," I said.

"I know! I read about it in—"

"Please don't say a travel guide."

T.J. looked at the floor.

Alex picked up a box of assorted wooden tools. "Honestly, Chase, we don't have time to bring you up to speed. T.J. fights Hrungnir. I make a ceramic warrior who fights the giant's ceramic warrior. You play water boy, or heal, or whatever. It's pretty straightforward."

I stared at the bags of clay. "A ceramic warrior. As in *magic* pottery?"

"Pottery 101," Alex repeated, like that was obvious. "T.J., would you start cutting those slabs? I need slices one inch thick, about sixty or seventy

of them.”

“Sure! Do I get to use your garrote?”

Alex laughed long and hard. “Absolutely not. There should be a cutter in that gray tub.”

T.J. sulked off to find a regular clay cutter.

“And you,” Alex told me, “you’re going to be making coils.”

“Coils.”

“I know you can roll clay into coils. It’s just like making snakes out of Play-Doh.”

I wondered how she knew my dark secret—that I had enjoyed Play-Doh as a kid. (And when I say *kid*, I mean up to, like, age eleven.) I grudgingly admitted that this was within my scope of talents. “And you?”

“The hardest part is using the wheel,” she said. “The most important components have to be thrown.”

By *thrown*, I knew she meant *shaped on the wheel*, not *thrown across the room*, though with Alex the two activities often went together.

“All right, boys,” she said. “Let’s get to work.”

After a few hours spent rolling coils, my shoulders ached. My shirt stuck to my sweaty skin. When I closed my eyes, clay snakes flopped around on the backs of my eyelids.

My only relief was getting up to change the station on the proprietor’s little radio whenever Alex or T.J. didn’t like a song. T.J. preferred martial music, but English radio had a shocking lack of marching-band tunes. Alex favored songs from Japanese anime—also in short supply on the AM/FM dial. Finally, they both settled on Duran Duran, for reasons I can’t explain.

From time to time, I brought Alex soft drinks from the proprietor’s mini fridge. Her favorite was Tizer, a sort of cherry soda with extra twang. I didn’t like it, but Alex quickly got addicted. Her lips turned bright red like a vampire’s, which I found both disturbing and strangely fascinating.

Meanwhile T.J. ran back and forth between his slab-cutting and the kiln, which he was heating up for an epic day of firing. He seemed to take special pleasure in poking pencil-stub-size dents in the slabs so they wouldn’t crack when baked. He did this while humming “Hungry Like the Wolf”—not my favorite song, given my personal history. T.J. seemed cheerful for a guy who had a duel scheduled with a twenty-foot-tall stone giant in the morning. I decided not to remind him that if he died here in England, he would stay dead, no matter how friendly the locals were.

I had placed my worktable as close as I could to Alex's wheel so I could talk to her. Usually I waited to ask her a question until she was centering a new lump of clay. With both her hands engaged, she was less likely to hit me.

"Have you done this before?" I asked. "Made a pottery guy?"

She glanced over, her face flecked with white porcelain. "Tried a few times. Nothing this big. But my family..." She bore down on the clay, molding it into a beehive-like cone. "Like Hrungnir said, we have the necessary skills."

"Your family." I tried to imagine Loki sitting at a table, rolling clay snakes.

"The Fierros." Alex shot me a wary look. "You really don't know? Never heard of Fierro Ceramics?"

"Uh...should I have?"

She smiled, as if she found my ignorance refreshing. "If you knew anything about cooking or home décor, maybe. It was a hot brand about ten years ago. But that's fine. I'm not talking about the machine-made crap my dad sells, anyway. I'm talking about my grandfather's art. He started the business when he emigrated from Tlatilco."

"Tlatilco." I tried to place the name. "I'm guessing that's outside I-95?"

Alex laughed. "No reason you'd have heard of it. Tiny place in Mexico. These days it's really just a subsection of Mexico City. According to my grandfather, our family has been making pottery there since before the Aztecs. Tlatilco used to be this super-ancient culture." She pressed her thumbs into the center of her beehive, opening up the sides of the new pot.

It still seemed like magic to me the way she did it, shaping such a delicate and perfectly symmetrical vase with nothing but strength and spin. The few times I'd tried to use a wheel, I'd nearly broken my fingers and managed to turn a lump of clay into a slightly uglier lump of clay.

"Who knows what's true?" Alex continued. "These are just family stories. Legends. But my abuelo took them seriously. When he moved to Boston, he kept doing things the old way. Even if he was just making a plate or a cup, he'd create every piece by hand, with lots of pride and attention to detail."

"Blitzen would like that."

Alex sat back, regarding her pot. "Yeah, my granddad would have made a good dwarf. Then my dad took over the business and decided to go

commercial. He sold out. He mass-produced lines of ceramic dishware, entered into deals with home-furnishing-supply chains. He made millions before people started realizing the quality was going downhill.”

I recalled her father’s bitter words in my dream: *You had so much potential. You understood the craft almost as well as your grandfather.*

“He wanted you to carry on the family business.”

She studied me, no doubt wondering how I’d guessed. I almost told her about the dream, but Alex *really* did not like having people inside her head, even unintentionally. And I didn’t like being yelled at.

“My father is an idiot,” she said. “He didn’t understand how I could like pottery but not want to make money off it. He definitely didn’t appreciate me listening to my granddad’s crazy ideas.”

“Such as?”

Over at his worktable, T.J. kept poking holes in the clay slices with a dowel, creating different patterns, like stars and spirals. “This is kind of fun,” he admitted. “Therapeutic!”

Alex’s Tizer-red lips curled up at the edges. “My abuelo made pottery for a living, but his real interest was in our ancestors’ sculptures. He wanted to understand the spirituality of them. That wasn’t easy. I mean...after so many centuries, trying to figure out your heritage when it’s been buried under so much else—Olmec, Aztec, Spanish, Mexican. How do you even know what’s true? How do you reclaim it?”

I got the feeling her questions were rhetorical and didn’t require answers from me, which was just as well. I couldn’t think clearly with T.J. humming “Rio” and doweling smiley faces in his clay.

“But your granddad managed,” I guessed.

“He thought so.” Alex spun up the wheel again, sponging the sides of her pot. “So did I. My dad...” Her expression soured. “Well, he liked to blame...you know, the way I am...on Loki. He didn’t like it *at all* when I found validation on the Fierro side of the family.”

My brain felt like my hands—as if a layer of clay was tightening over it, sucking out all the moisture. “Sorry, I don’t understand. What does this have to do with magic ceramic warriors?”

“You’ll see. Fish the phone out of my pocket and call Sam, will you? Give her an update. Then shut up so I can concentrate.”

Even under orders, pulling something out of Alex’s pants pocket while she was wearing said pants seemed like a good way to get myself killed.

I managed, with only a couple of small panic attacks, and found that Alex's phone had data service in the UK. She must have arranged that when she arranged her multicurrency theft.

I texted Samirah and gave her the lowdown.

A few minutes later, the phone buzzed with her reply. *K. GL. Fighting. GTG.*

I wondered if *GTG* in this context meant *got to go*, *Gunderson throttling girlfriend*, or *giants torturing Gunderson*. I decided to think optimistically and went with the first option.

As the afternoon wore on, the back tables filled up with fired porcelain squares that looked like armored plates. Alex taught me how, by combining my coils, to form cylinders that would serve as arms and legs. Her efforts at the pottery wheel produced feet, hands, and a head, all shaped like vases and meticulously decorated with Viking runes.

She spent hours on the faces—two of them, side by side, like the piece of art that Alex's father had shattered in my dream. The left face had heavily-lidded, suspicious eyes, a cartoon villain's curly mustache, and a huge grimacing mouth. The right face was a grinning skull with hollow eyeholes and a lolling tongue. Looking at the two visages pressed together, I couldn't help thinking about Alex's own different-colored eyes.

By evening, we'd laid out all the pieces of the ceramic warrior on our quadruple table, creating an eight-foot-long Frankenstein's monster, some assembly required.

"Well." T.J. wiped his forehead. "That thing would scare me if *I* had to face it in battle."

"Agreed," I said. "And speaking of faces—?"

"It's a duality mask," Alex explained. "My ancestors from Tlatilco—they made a lot of the figurines with two faces, or one face with two halves. Nobody's sure why. My grandfather thought they represented two spirits in a single body."

"Like my old Lenape friend Mother William!" T.J. said. "So, I guess the native cultures down in Mexico had *argr*, too!" He corrected himself quickly. "I mean trans folks, gender-fluid folks."

*Argr*, the Viking word for someone of shifting gender, literally meant *unmanly*, which was not an Alex-approved term.

I studied the mask. "No wonder the duality art spoke to you. Your granddad...he *got* who you were."

“He got it,” Alex agreed, “and he honored it. When he died, my dad did his best to discredit my abuelo’s ideas, destroy his art, and turn me into a good little businessperson. I wouldn’t let him.”

She rubbed the nape of her neck, maybe subconsciously touching the tattooed symbol of the figure-eight serpents. She had embraced shape-shifting, refusing to let Loki ruin it for her. She had done the same with pottery, even though her father had turned the family business into something she despised.

“Alex,” I said, “the more I find out about you, the more I admire you.”

Her expression was a mix of amusement and exasperation, like I was a cute puppy that had just peed on the carpet. “Hold the admiration until I can bring this thing to life, Smooth Talker. *That’s* the real trick. In the meantime, we all need some fresh air.” She threw me another wad of money. “Let’s go get some dinner. You’re buying.”



## I Attend a Zombie Pep Rally

DINNER WAS fish and chips at a place called Mr. Chippy. T.J. found the name hilarious. While we ate, he kept saying “MR. CHIPPY!” in a loud, bubbly voice, which did not amuse the guy at the register.

Afterward, we returned to the pottery studio to lay low for the night. T.J. suggested going back to the ship to be with the rest of the crew, but Alex insisted she needed to keep an eye on her ceramic warrior.

She texted Sam an update.

Sam’s response: *NP. OK here. Fighting water horses.*

*Fighting water horses* was written in emojis: fist, wave, horse. I guessed Sam had fought so many of them today she’d decided to make a text shortcut.

“You got her international coverage, too,” I noted.

“Well, yeah,” Alex said. “Gotta keep in touch with my sister.”

I wanted to ask why she hadn’t done the same for me. Then I remembered I didn’t have a phone. Most einherjar didn’t bother with them. For one thing, getting a number and paying the bill is hard when you’re officially dead. Also, no data plan covers the rest of the Nine Worlds. And the reception in Valhalla is horrible. I blame the roof of golden shields. Despite all that, Alex insisted on keeping a phone. How she managed, I didn’t know. Maybe Samirah had registered her in some kind of *friends & family & also dead family* program.

As soon as we reached the studio, Alex checked on her ceramic project. I wasn’t sure whether to be relieved or disappointed that it hadn’t assembled itself and come to life yet.

“I’ll check it again in a few hours,” she said. “Gonna...”

She staggered to the only comfy chair in the room—the proprietor's clay-spattered Barcalounger—then passed out and began to snore. Yikes, she could *snore*. T.J. and I decided to bunk in the storage room, where we'd be better insulated from Alex's impression of a dying lawn mower.

We made some impromptu mattresses out of canvas tarps.

T.J. cleaned his rifle and sharpened his bayonet—a nighttime ritual for him.

I lay down and watched the rain patter against the skylights. The glass leaked, dripping on the metal shelves and filling the room with the smell of damp rust, but I didn't mind. I was grateful for the steady drumming.

"So, what happens tomorrow?" I asked T.J. "I mean exactly?"

T.J. laughed. "Exactly? I fight a twenty-foot-tall giant until one of us dies or can't fight anymore. Meanwhile, the giant's clay warrior fights Alex's clay warrior until one of them is rubble. Alex, I dunno, cheers on her creation, I guess. You heal me if you can."

"That's allowed?"

T.J. shrugged. "Far as I know, anything's allowed for you and Alex as long as you don't actually fight."

"Doesn't it bother you that your opponent is fifteen feet taller than you?"

T.J. straightened his back. "Do you think I look that short? I'm almost six feet!"

"How can you be so calm?"

He inspected the edge of his bayonet, holding it up to his face so it seemed to cut him in half like a duality mask. "I've already beat the odds so many times, Magnus. On James Island, South Carolina? I was standing right next to a friend of mine, Joe Wilson, when a Reb sniper—" He made a finger gun and pulled the trigger. "Could have been me. Could have been any of us. I hit the dirt, rolled over and stared up at the sky, and this sense of calm washed over me. I wasn't afraid anymore."

"Yeah, that's called shock."

He shook his head. "Nah, I saw *Valkyries*, Magnus—ladies on horses, swirling in the skies above our regiment. I finally believed what my ma had always told me about my dad being Tyr. Those crazy stories about Norse gods in Boston. Right then I decided...okay. What happens happens. If my dad is the god of bravery, I'd better make him proud."

I wasn't sure that would've been my reaction. I was glad I had a father who was proud of me for healing people, enjoying the outdoors, and tolerating his talking sword.

"You've met your dad?" I asked. "He gave you that bayonet, right?"

T.J. folded the blade in its chamois cloth like he was tucking it into bed. "The bayonet was waiting for me when I checked into Valhalla. I never met Tyr face-to-face." He shrugged. "Still, every time I accept a challenge, I feel closer to him. The more dangerous, the better."

"You must feel *super* close to him right now," I guessed.

T.J. grinned. "Yep. Good times."

I wondered how a god could go a hundred and fifty years without acknowledging a son as brave as T.J., but my friend wasn't alone. I knew a lot of einherjar who had never met their parents. Face time with the kids wasn't a priority for Norse deities—maybe because they had hundreds or thousands of children. Or maybe because the gods were jerks.

T.J. lay back on his tarp mattress. "Now I just gotta figure out how to kill that giant. I'm worried a direct frontal charge might not work."

For a Civil War soldier, this was creative thinking.

"So what's your plan?" I asked.

"No idea!" He tipped his Union cap over his eyes. "Maybe something will come to me in my dreams. 'Night, Magnus."

He began to snore almost as loudly as Alex.

I couldn't win.

I lay awake, wondering how Sam, Halfborn, and Mallory were doing on board the ship. I wondered why Blitzen and Hearthstone weren't back yet, and why it would take them five days just to scout out the location of a whetstone. Njord had promised I'd see them again before the really dangerous stuff went down. I should've gotten him to swear an oath on his immaculately groomed feet.

Mainly though, I worried about my own impending duel with Loki: a contest of insults with the most eloquent Norse deity. What had I been thinking? No matter how magical Kvasir's Mead was, how could it possibly help me beat Loki at his own game?

No pressure, of course. If I lost I'd just be reduced to a shadow of myself and imprisoned in Helheim while all my friends died and Ragnarok destroyed the Nine Worlds. Maybe I could buy a book of Viking insults at the Viking Centre gift shop.

T.J. snored on. I admired his courage and positivity. I wondered if I'd have a tenth of his presence of mind when I had to face Loki.

My conscience answered *NO!* then broke down in hysterical sobbing.

Thanks to the rain, I finally managed to sleep, but my dreams were not relaxing, nor were they reassuring.

I found myself back on *Naglfar*, the Ship of the Dead. Masses of draugr swarmed the deck, rags and mildewed armor hanging from their bodies, their spears and swords corroded like burnt matchsticks. The warriors' spirits fluttered inside their rib cages like blue flames clinging to the last remnants of kindling.

Thousands upon thousands shambled toward the foredeck, where hand-painted banners hung along the rails and waved from the yardarms in the frigid wind: *MAKE SOME NOISE!, GO, DRAUGR, GO!, RAGNAROK AND ROLL!*, and other slogans so terrible they could only have been written by the dishonored dead.

I did not see Loki. But standing at the helm, on a dais cobbled together from dead men's nails, was a giant so old I almost thought he might be one of the undead. I'd never seen him before, but I'd heard stories about him: Hrym, the captain of the ship. His very name meant *decrepit*. His bare arms were painfully emaciated. Wisps of white hair clung to his leathery head like icicles, making me think of pictures I'd seen of prehistoric men found in melting glaciers. Moldy white furs covered his wasted frame.

His pale blue eyes, though, were very much alive. He couldn't have been as frail as he looked. In one hand, he brandished a battle-ax bigger than I was. In the other hand was a shield made from the sternum of some huge animal, the space between the ribs fitted with sheets of studded iron.

"*Soldiers of Helheim!*" the giant bellowed. "*Behold!*"

He gestured across the gray water. At the other end of the bay, the glacial cliffs crumbled more rapidly, ice cracking and sloughing into the sea with a sound like distant artillery.

"The way will soon be clear!" the giant shouted. "Then we sail to battle! Death to the gods!"

The cry went up all around me—hollow, hateful voices of the long dead taking up the chant.

Mercifully, my dream shifted. I stood in a recently plowed wheat field on a warm sunny day. In the distance, wildflowers blanketed rolling hills.

Beyond that, milk-white waterfalls tumbled down the sides of picturesque mountains.

Some part of my brain thought: *At last, a pleasant dream! I'm in a commercial for organic whole wheat bread!*

Then an old man in blue robes hobbled toward me. His clothes were tattered and mud-stained from long travel. His wide-brimmed hat shaded his face, though I could make out his graying beard and secretive smile.

When he reached me, he looked up, revealing one eye that gleamed with malicious humor. The other eye socket was dark and empty.

“I am Bolverk,” he said, though of course I knew it was Odin. Aside from his less-than-creative disguise, once you’ve heard Odin give a keynote address on best berserker practices, you never forget his voice. “I’m here to make you the deal of a lifetime.”

From beneath his cloak, he produced an object the size of a cheese round, covered in cloth. I was afraid it might be one of Odin’s inspirational CD collections. Then he unwrapped it, revealing a circular whetstone of gray quartz. It reminded me of the bashing end of Hrungnir’s maul, only smaller and less maul-worthy.

Odin/Bolverk offered it to me. “Will you pay the price?”

Suddenly Odin was gone. Before me loomed a face so large I couldn’t take it all in: glowing green eyes with vertical slits for pupils, leathery nostrils dripping with mucus. The stench of acid and rotten meat burned my lungs. The creature’s maw opened to reveal rows of jagged triangular teeth ready to shred me—and I sat bolt upright, screaming in my bed of tarps.

Above me, dim gray light filtered through the skylights. The rain had stopped. T.J. sat across from me, munching a bagel, a strange pair of glasses on his face. Each lens had a clear center, bordered by a ring of amber glass, making T.J. look like he’d acquired a second set of irises.

“Finally up!” he noted. “Bad dreams, huh?”

My whole body felt jittery, like coins rattling inside a change-separator machine.

“Wh-what’s going on?” I asked. “What’s with the glasses?”

Alex Fierro appeared in the doorway. “A scream that high could only be Magnus. Ah, good. You’re awake.” She tossed me a brown paper bag that smelled of garlic. “Come on. Time’s wasting.”

She led us to the main room, where her ceramic duality dude still lay in pieces. She circled the table, checking her work and nodding with

satisfaction, though I couldn't see that anything had changed. "Okay! Yep. We're good."

I opened the paper bag and frowned. "You left me a garlic bagel?"

"Last awake, last choice," Alex said.

"My breath is going to be terrible."

"More terrible," Alex corrected. "Well, that's fine. *I'm* not kissing you. Are you kissing him, T.J.?"

"Wasn't planning on it." T.J. popped the last of his bagel in his mouth and grinned.

"I—I didn't say anything about—" I stammered. "I didn't mean..." My face felt like it was crawling with fire ants. "Whatever. T.J., why are you wearing those glasses, anyway?"

I'm good at subtly changing the conversation like that when I'm embarrassed. It's a gift.

T.J. wiggled his new specs. "You helped jog my memory, Magnus, talking about that sniper last night! Then I dreamed about Hrungnir and those weird amber eyes of his, and I saw myself laughing and shooting him dead. Then, when I woke up, I remembered I had these in my haversack. Completely forgot about them!"

It sounded like T.J. had way better dreams than I did, which was no surprise.

"They're sniper glasses," he explained. "They're what we used before scopes were invented. I bought this pair in Valhalla, oh, a hundred years ago, I guess, so I'm pretty sure they're magic. Can't wait to try them out!"

I doubted Hrungnir was going to stand still while T.J. sniped at him from a safe distance. I also doubted any of us would be doing much laughing today. But I didn't want to spoil T.J.'s pre-combat buzz.

I turned to the ceramic warrior. "So, what's going on with Pottery Barn guy? Why is he still in pieces?"

Alex beamed. "Pottery Barn? Good name! But let's not assume Pottery Barn's gender."

"Uh. Okay."

"Wish me luck." She took a deep breath, then traced her fingers across the ceramic warrior's two faces.

The ceramic pieces clattered and flew together as if they'd been magnetized. Pottery Barn sat up and focused on Alex. The faces were still

hardened clay, but the frozen twin sneers suddenly seemed angrier, hungrier. The right side's eye sockets glowed with golden light.

"Yes!" Alex exhaled with relief. "Okay. Pottery Barn is nonbinary, as I suspected. Preferred pronouns are *they* and *them*. And they are ready to fight."

Pottery Barn jumped off the table. Their limbs grinded and scraped like stones against cement. They stood about eight feet tall, which was plenty scary to me, but I wondered if they stood a chance against whatever clay warrior Hrungnir had created.

Pottery Barn must have sensed my doubt. They turned their faces toward me and raised their right fist—a heavy clay vase glazed bloodred.

"Stop!" Alex ordered. "He's not the enemy!"

Pottery Barn turned to Alex as if asking *You sure about that?*

"Maybe they don't like garlic," Alex speculated. "Magnus, finish that bagel quickly and let's get on the road. We can't keep our enemies waiting!"



## Tveirvigi = Worst Vigi

AS WE WALKED through the early-morning streets of York, I ate my garlic bagel and told my friends about my dreams. Our new buddy Pottery Barn clanked along beside us, drawing disapproving looks from the sleepy locals, like *Bah, tourists.*

At least my story kept T.J.’s attention, so he didn’t pester too many Yorkshire folk with thank-yous and handshakes.

“Hmm,” he said. “I wish I knew why we needed the whetstone. I think maybe Odin discussed the Bolverk incident in one of his books—*The Aesir Path to Winning?* Or was it *The Art of the Steal?* I can’t remember the details. A big beast with green eyes, you say?”

“And lots of teeth.” I tried to shake off the memory. “Maybe Odin killed the beast to get the stone? Or maybe he hit the beast in the face with the stone, and that’s how he got the mead?”

T.J. frowned. He’d propped his new glasses on the rim of his cap. “Neither sounds right. I don’t remember any monster. I’m pretty sure Odin stole the mead from giants.”

I recalled my earlier dream of about Fjalar and Gjalar’s chain-saw massacre. “But didn’t dwarves kill Kvasir? How did giants get the mead?”

T.J. shrugged. “All the old stories are basically about one group murdering another group to steal their stuff. That’s probably how.”

This made me proud to be a Viking. “Okay, but we don’t have much time to figure it out. Those glaciers I saw are melting fast. Midsummer is in, like, twelve days now, but I think Loki’s ship will be able to sail *long* before that.”

“Guys,” Alex said. “How about this? First, we beat the giant, *then* we talk about our next impossible task?”

That sounded sensible, though I suspected Alex just wanted me to shut up so I wouldn’t breathe more garlic in her direction.

“Anyone know where we’re going?” I asked. “What’s a Konungsgurtha?”

“It means *king’s court*,” T.J. said.

“Was that in your travel book?”

“No.” T.J. laughed. “Old Norse 101. Didn’t you take that class yet?”

“I had a scheduling conflict,” I muttered.

“Well, this is England. There’s got to be a king with a court around here somewhere.”

Alex stopped at the next crossroads. She pointed to one of the signs.  
“What about King’s Square? Will that do?”

Pottery Barn seemed to think so. They turned their double faces in that direction and strode off. We followed, since it would’ve been irresponsible to let an eight-foot-tall pile of ceramics walk through town unaccompanied.

We found the place. Hooray.

King’s Square wasn’t a square, and it wasn’t very kingly. The streets made a Y around a triangular park paved in gray slate, with some scrubby trees and a couple of park benches. The surrounding buildings were dark, the storefronts shuttered. The only soul in sight was the giant Hrungnir, his boots planted on either side of a pharmacy named, appropriately enough, Boots. The giant was dressed in his same quilted armor, his shaggy limestone beard freshly avalanched, his amber eyes bright with that can’t-wait-to-kill-you gleam. His maul stood upright beside him like the world’s largest Festivus pole.

When Hrungnir saw us, his mouth split in a grin that would’ve made masons’ and bricklayers’ hearts flutter. “Well, well, you showed up! I was beginning to think you’d run away.” He knit his gravelly eyebrows. “Most people run away. It’s very annoying.”

“Can’t imagine why,” I said.

“Mmm.” Hrungnir nodded at Pottery Barn. “That’s your ceramic second, eh? Doesn’t look like much.”

“You just wait,” Alex promised.

“I look forward to it!” the giant boomed. “I love killing people here. You know, long ago”—he gestured toward a nearby pub—“the Norse king

of Jorvik's court stood right there. And where you are standing, the Christians had a church. See? You're walking on somebody's grave."

Sure enough, the slab of slate under my feet was etched with a name and dates too faded to read. The whole square was paved with tombstones, maybe from the floor of the old church. The idea of walking over so many dead people made me queasy, even though I was technically a dead person myself.

The giant chuckled. "Seems fitting, doesn't it? Already so many dead humans here, what's a few more?" He faced T.J. "Are you ready?"

"Born ready," T.J. said. "Died ready. Resurrected ready. But I'm giving you one last chance, Hrungnir. It's not too late to opt for bingo."

"Ha! No, little einherji! I worked all night on my fighting partner. I don't intend to waste him on bingo. Mokkerkalfe, get over here!"

The ground shook with a squishy *THUMP, THUMP*. From around the corner appeared a man of clay. He was nine feet tall, crudely shaped, still glistening wet. He looked like something *I* might make in Pottery 101—an ugly, lumpy creature with arms too thin and legs too thick, his head no more than a blob with two eyeholes and a frowny face carved into it.

Next to me, Pottery Barn started to clatter, and I didn't think it was from excitement.

"Bigger doesn't mean stronger," I told them under my breath.

Pottery Barn turned their faces toward me. Of course, their expressions didn't change, but I sensed that both mouths were telling me the same thing: *Shut up, Magnus.*

Alex crossed her arms. She'd tied her yellow raincoat around her waist, revealing the plaid pink-and-green sweater-vest I thought of as her combat uniform. "You do sloppy work, Hrungnir. You call that a clay man? And what kind of name is Mokkerkalfe?"

The giant raised his eyebrows. "We'll see whose work is sloppy when the fighting begins. Mokkerkalfe means *Mist Calf!* A poetic, honorable name for a warrior!"

"Uh-huh," Alex said. "Well, this is Pottery Barn."

Hrungnir scratched his beard. "I must admit, that is also a poetic name for a warrior. But can it fight?"

"*They* can fight just fine," Alex promised. "And they'll take down that slag heap of yours, no problem."

Pottery Barn looked at their creator like *I will?*

“Enough talk!” Hrungnir hefted his maul and scowled at T.J. “Shall we begin, little man?”

Thomas Jefferson Jr. put on his amber-rimmed glasses. He unslung his rifle and pulled a small cylindrical paper packet—a gunpowder cartridge—from his kit.

“This rifle has a poetic name, too,” he said. “It’s a Springfield 1861. Made in Massachusetts, just like me.” He tore open the cartridge with his teeth, then poured the contents into the rifle’s muzzle. He pulled out the ramrod and jammed down the powder and ball. “I used to be able to shoot three rounds a minute with this beauty, but I’ve been practicing for several hundred years. Let’s see if I can do five rounds a minute today.”

He fished out a little metal cap from his side pouch and set it under the hammer. I’d seen him do all this before, but the way he could load, talk, and walk at the same time was as magical as Alex’s skill at the pottery wheel. For me, it would’ve been like trying to tie my shoes and whistle “The Star-Spangled Banner” while jogging.

“Very well!” yelled Hrungnir. “LET THE TVEIRVIGI BEGIN!”

My first task was my favorite one—getting out of the way.

I scrambled right as the giant’s mallet slammed into a tree, smashing it to kindling. With a dry *CRACK*, T.J.’s rifle discharged. The giant roared in pain. He staggered backward, smoke streaming from his left eye, which was now black instead of amber.

“That was rude!” Hrungnir raised his mallet again, but T.J. circled to his blind side, calmly reloading. His second shot sparked off the giant’s nose.

Meanwhile, Mokkerkalfe lumbered forward, swinging his tiny arms, but Pottery Barn was quicker. (I wanted to credit the great work I’d done on their coil joints.) P.B. ducked to one side and came up behind Mokkerkalfe, slamming both vase-fists into his back.

Unfortunately, their fists sank into Mokkerkalfe’s soft gooey flesh. As Mokkerkalfe turned, trying to face his opponent, P.B. got yanked off their feet and dragged around like a ceramic tail.

“Let go!” Alex yelled. “Pottery Barn! Oh, *meinfretr*.”

She loosened her garrote, though how she could help without actually fighting, I wasn’t sure.

*CRACK!* T.J.’s musket ball ricocheted off the giant’s neck, shattering a second-story window. I was amazed the locals hadn’t already come out to investigate the commotion. Maybe there was a strong glamour at work. Or maybe the good people of York were used to early-morning Viking/giant smack-downs.

T.J. reloaded as the giant pressed him back.

“Stand still, little mortal!” roared Hrungnir. “I want to smash you!”

King’s Square was close quarters for a jotun. T.J. tried to stay on Hrungnir’s blind side, but the giant only needed one well-timed step or one lucky swipe to flatten T.J. into an infantry pancake.

Hrungnir swung his maul again. T.J. leaped aside just in time as the maul splintered a dozen tombstones, leaving a ten-feet-deep hole in the courtyard.

Meanwhile, Alex lashed out with her wire. She lassoed Pottery Barn’s legs and yanked them free. Unfortunately, she put a little too much muscle into it just as Mokkerkalfe swung in the same direction. With the excessive momentum, Pottery Barn went flying across the square and smashed through the window of a store offering payday loans.

Mokkerkalfe turned toward Alex. The clay man made a wet gurgling sound in his chest, like the growl of a carnivorous toad.

“Whoa there, boy,” Alex said. “I wasn’t actually fighting. I’m not your \_\_\_\_\_”

*GURGLE!* Mokkerkalfe launched himself like a wrestler, more quickly than I would’ve thought possible, and Alex disappeared under three hundred pounds of wet clay.

“NO!” I screamed.

Before I could move or even process how to help Alex, T.J. screamed at the other end of the courtyard.

“HA!” Hrungnir raised his fist. Wrapped in his fingers, struggling helplessly, was Thomas Jefferson Jr.

“One squeeze,” the giant boasted, “and this contest is over!”

I stood paralyzed. I wanted to break into two parts, to become a duality like our ceramic warrior. But even if I could, I didn’t see how I could help either of my friends.

Then the giant tightened his fist, and T.J. howled in agony.



TWENTY-ONE

## Fun with Open-Heart Surgery

POTTERY BARN saved the day.

(And, no. That's not a line I ever thought I would use.)

Our ceramic friend exploded from a third-story window above the payday loan office. They hurled themselves onto Hrungnir's face, clamping their legs around the giant's upper lip and whaling his nose with both their vase-fists.

"PFBAH! GET OFF!" Hrungnir staggered, releasing T.J., who landed in an unmoving heap.

Meanwhile, Mokkerkalfe struggled to get up, which must have been difficult with Alex Fierro imprinted on his chest. From beneath his weight, Alex groaned. Relief washed over me. At least she was alive and might stay that way for a few more seconds. Triage decision: I ran toward T.J., whose condition I wasn't so optimistic about.

I knelt at his side, put my hand against his chest. I almost snatched my hand away again because the damage I sensed was so bad. A trickle of red etched the corner of his mouth like he'd been drinking Tizer—but I knew it wasn't Tizer.

"Hang on, buddy," I muttered. "I got you."

I glanced over at Hrungnir, who was still stumbling around trying to grab Pottery Barn off his face. So far so good. At the other side of the square, Mokkerkalfe had peeled himself away from Alex and now stood over her, gurgling angrily and pounding his blobby fists together. Not so good.

I yanked the runestone from my neck chain and summoned Sumarbrander.

“Jack!” I yelled.  
“What?” he yelled back.  
“Defend Alex!”  
“What?”  
“But do it without actually fighting!”  
“What?”  
“Just keep that clay giant off her!”  
“What?”  
“Distract him. GO!”

I was glad he didn’t say *what* again, or I would’ve worried that my sword was going deaf.

Jack flew over to Mokkerkalfe, positioning himself between the clay man and Alex. “Hey, buddy!” Jack’s runes pulsed up and down his blade like equalizer lights. “You want to hear a story? A song? Wanna dance?”

While Mokkerkalfe struggled to comprehend the strange hallucination he was having, I returned my attention to T.J.

I put both hands against his sternum and summoned the power of Frey. Sunlight spread across the blue wool fibers of his jacket. Warmth sank into his chest, knitting his broken ribs, mending his punctured lungs, unflattening several internal organs that did not function well when they were flattened.

As my healing power flowed into Thomas Jefferson Jr., his memories backwashed into my mind. I saw his mother in a faded gingham dress, her hair prematurely gray, her face stretched thin from years of hard work and worry. She knelt in front of ten-year-old T.J., her hands tightly clasping his shoulders as if she were afraid he might blow away in a storm.

“Don’t you *ever* point that at a white man,” she scolded.  
“Ma, it’s just a stick,” T.J. said. “I’m playing.”  
“You don’t *get* to play,” she snapped. “You play-shoot at a white man with a stick, he’s going to real-shoot you back with a gun. I’m not losing another child, Thomas. You hear me?”

She shook him, trying to rattle the message into him.  
A different image: T.J. as a teenager, reading a flyer posted on a brick wall by the wharf:

#### TO COLORED MEN

!FREEDOM! PROTECTION, PAY, AND A CALL TO MILITARY SERVICE!

I could sense T.J.'s pulse racing. He had never been so excited. His hands itched to hold a rifle. He felt a calling—an undeniable impulse, like all those times he'd been challenged to fistfights in the alley behind his ma's tavern. This was a personal challenge, and he could not refuse it.

I saw him in the hold of a Union ship, the seas pitching as his comrades threw up in buckets on either side of him. A friend of his, William H. Butler, groaned in misery. "They bring our people over on slave ships. They free us. They promise to pay us to fight. Then they put us right back into the belly of a ship." But T.J. held his rifle eagerly, his heart pumping with excitement. He was proud of his uniform. Proud of those stars and stripes flapping on the mast somewhere over their heads. The Union had given him a *real* gun. They were *paying* him to shoot rebels—white men who would most definitely kill him given a chance. He grinned in the dark.

Then I saw him running across no-man's-land at the battle of Fort Wagner, gun smoke rising like volcanic gas all around him. The air was thick with sulfur and the screams of the wounded, but T.J. stayed focused on his nemesis, Jeffrey Toussaint, who had dared to call him out. T.J. leveled his bayonet and charged, exhilarated by the sudden fear in Toussaint's eyes.

Back in the present, T.J. gasped. Behind his amber-rimmed glasses, his vision cleared.

He croaked, "My left, your right."

I dove to one side. I'll admit I didn't have time to distinguish left from right. I rolled onto my back as T.J. raised his rifle and fired.

Hrungnir, now free of Pottery Barn's affections, loomed over us, his maul raised for one final strike. T.J.'s musket ball caught him in the right eye, snuffing out his sight.

"RARG!" Hrungnir dropped his weapon and sat down hard in the middle of King's Square, crushing two park benches under his ample butt. In a nearby tree, Pottery Barn hung broken and battered, their left leg dangling from a branch ten feet above their head, but when they saw Hrungnir's predicament, they grinded their head against their neck with a sound like laughter.

"Go!" T.J. snapped me out of my shock. "Help Alex!"

I scrambled to my feet and ran.

Jack was still trying to entertain Mokkerkalfe, but his song-and-dance routine was wearing thin. (That happens quickly with Jack.) Mokkerkalfe

tried to swat him aside. The blade got stuck on the back of the clay man's sticky hand.

"Yuck!" Jack complained. "Let me go!"

Jack was a little obsessive about cleanliness. After lying at the bottom of the Charles River for a thousand years, he wasn't a fan of mud.

As Mokkerkalfe stomped around, trying to dislodge the talking sword from his hand, I ran to Alex's side. She was spread-eagled, shellacked in clay from head to foot, groaning and twitching her fingers.

I knew Alex didn't like my healing powers. She hated the idea of me peeking into her emotions and memories, which just happened automatically as part of the process. But I decided her survival outweighed her right to privacy.

I clamped my hand on her shoulder. Golden light seeped through my fingers. Warmth poured into Alex's body, working its way from her shoulder into her core.

I steeled myself for more painful images. I was ready to face her awful father again, or see how badly Alex had been bullied at school, or how she'd been beaten up in the homeless shelters.

Instead, a single clear memory hit me: nothing special, just breakfast at Café 19 in Valhalla, a quick snapshot of me, stupid Magnus Chase, the way Alex saw me. I was sitting across the table from her, grinning at something she'd just said. A little glob of bread was stuck between my front teeth. My hair was messy. I looked relaxed and happy and utterly dorky. I held Alex's gaze for a second too long and things got awkward. I blushed and looked away.

That was her entire memory.

I recalled that morning. I remembered thinking at the time: *Well, I've made a complete idiot of myself, as usual.* But it had hardly been an earthshaking event.

So why was it at the top of Alex's memories? And why did I feel such a rush of satisfaction seeing my dorky self from Alex's perspective?

Alex opened her eyes abruptly. She swatted my hand off her shoulder.  
"Stop that."

"Sorry, I—"

"My right, your left!"

I dove one way. Alex rolled the other. Mokkerkalfe's fist, now free of Jack's blade, slammed into the slate pavement between us. I caught a

glimpse of Jack, leaning in the doorway of the Boots pharmacy, covered with mud and groaning like a dying soldier, “He got me! He got me!”

The clay man rose, ready to kill us. Jack would be no help. Alex and I were not up to this fight. Then a pile of pottery hurtled out of nowhere and landed on Mokkerkalfe’s back. Somehow, Pottery Barn had extricated themselves from the tree. Despite their missing left leg, despite their right vase hand being cracked to shards, Pottery Barn went into ceramic-berserker overdrive. They ripped into Mokkerkalfe’s back, gouging out chunks of wet clay as if excavating a collapsed well.

Mokkerkalfe stumbled. He tried to grab Pottery Barn, but his arms were too short. Then, with a sucking *POP*, Pottery Barn pulled something from Mokkerkalfe’s chest cavity and both warriors collapsed.

Mokkerkalfe steamed and began to melt. Pottery Barn rolled off their enemy’s carcass, their double faces turning toward Alex. Weakly, they lifted the thing they were holding. When I realized what it was, my garlic-bagel breakfast threatened to come back up again.

Pottery Barn was offering Alex the heart of their enemy—an actual heart muscle, much too big for a human. Maybe it had belonged to a horse or a cow? I decided I’d rather remain ignorant.

Alex knelt by Pottery Barn’s side. She placed her hand across the warrior’s double foreheads. “You did well,” she said, her voice quavering. “My Tlatilcan ancestors would be proud of you. My grandfather would be proud. Most of all, *I’m* proud.”

The gold light flickered in the skull face’s eye sockets, then went out. Pottery Barn’s arms collapsed. Their pieces lost magical cohesion and fell apart.

Alex allowed herself the space of three heartbeats to grieve. I could count them, because that gross muscle between Pottery Barn’s hands was still beating. Then she rose, clenched her fists, and turned toward Hrungnir.

The giant was not doing so well. He lay curled on his side, blind and gurgling in pain. T.J. walked around him, using his bone-steel bayonet to cut the giant’s sinews. Hrungnir’s Achilles tendons were already severed, making his legs useless. T.J. worked with cold, vicious efficiency to give the jotun’s arms the same treatment.

“Tyr’s tush,” Alex swore, the anger draining from her face. “Remind me never to duel Jefferson.”

We walked over to join him.

T.J. pressed the tip of his bayonet against the giant's chest. "We won, Hrungnir. Give us the location of Kvasir's Mead and I don't have to kill you."

Hrungnir cackled weakly. His teeth were spattered with gray liquid, like the buckets of slip back at the pottery studio.

"Oh, but you *do* have to kill me, little einherji," he croaked. "It's part of the duel! Better than leaving me here hobbled and in agony!"

"I could heal you," I offered.

Hrungnir curled his lip. "How typical of a weak, pathetic Frey-son. I welcome death! I will re-form from the icy abyss of Ginnungagap! And on the day of Ragnarok, I will find you on the field of Vigridr and crack your skull between my teeth!"

"Okay, then," T.J. said. "Death it is! But first, the location of Kvasir's Mead."

"Heh." Hrungnir gurgled more gray slip. "Very well. It won't matter. You'll never get past the guards. Go to Fläm, in the old Norse land you call Norway. Take the train. You'll see what you're after quick enough."

"Fläm?" I got a mental image of a tasty caramel dessert. Then I remembered that was *flan*.

"That's right," Hrungnir said. "Now kill me, son of Tyr! Go on. Right in the heart, unless you are as weak-willed as your friend!"

Alex started to say, "T.J...."

"Wait," I muttered.

Something was wrong. Hrungnir's tone was too mocking, too eager. But I was slow to compute the problem. Before I could suggest we should kill the giant some other way, T.J. accepted Hrungnir's final challenge.

He jabbed his bayonet into the giant's chest. The point hit something inside with a hard *clink!*

"Ahh." Hrungnir's death gasp sounded almost smug.

"Hey, guys?" Jack's weak voice called from over at the pharmacy.  
"Don't pierce his heart, okay? Stone giants' hearts explode."

Alex's eyes widened. "Hit the deck!"

**KA-BLAM!**

Shards of Hrungnir sprayed the square, breaking windows, destroying signs, and peppering brick walls.

My ears rang. The air smelled of flint sparks. Where the giant Hrungnir had lain, nothing remained but a smoking line of gravel.

I seemed unhurt. Alex looked okay. But T.J. knelt, groaning, with his hand cupped over his bleeding forehead.

“Let me see!” I rushed to his side, but the damage wasn’t as bad as I’d feared. A piece of shrapnel had embedded itself above his right eye—a triangular gray splinter like a flint exclamation point.

“Get it out!” he yelled.

I tried, but as soon as I pulled, T.J. howled in pain. I frowned. That made no medical sense. The shard couldn’t be that deep. There wasn’t even that much blood.

“Guys?” Alex said. “We have visitors.”

The locals were finally starting to come outside to check on the commotion, probably because Hrungnir’s exploding heart had shattered every window on the block.

“Can you walk?” I asked T.J.

“Yeah. Yeah, I think so.”

“Then let’s get you back to the ship. We’ll heal you there.”

I helped him to his feet, then went to retrieve Jack, who was still moaning about being covered in mud. I put him back into runestone form, which did not help my level of exhaustion. Alex knelt next to the remnants of Pottery Barn. She picked up their detached head, cradling it like an abandoned infant.

Then the three of us staggered back through York to find the *Big Banana*. I just hoped the water horses hadn’t sunk it along with our friends.



## I Have Bad News and—No, Actually I Just Have Bad News

THE SHIP was still intact. Halfborn, Mallory, and Samirah looked like they'd paid a heavy price to keep it that way.

Halfborn's left arm was in a sling. Mallory's wild red hair had been shorn off at chin-level. Sam stood at the rail dripping wet, wringing out her magic hijab.

"Water horses?" I asked.

Halfborn shrugged. "Nothing we couldn't handle. Half a dozen attacks since yesterday afternoon. About what I figured."

"One pulled me into the river by my hair," Mallory complained.

Halfborn grinned. "I think I gave you a pretty good haircut, considering I only had my battle-ax to work with. Let me tell you, Magnus, with the blade so close to her neck, I was tempted—"

"Shut up, oaf," Mallory growled.

"Exactly my point," said Halfborn. "But Samirah, now—you should've seen her. *She* was impressive."

"It was nothing," Sam muttered.

Mallory snorted. "Nothing? You got dragged under the river and came up *riding* a water horse. You mastered that beast. I've never heard of anyone who could do that."

Samirah winced slightly. She gave her hijab another twist, as if she wanted to squeeze out the last drops of the experience. "Valkyries get on well with horses. That's probably all it was."

"Hmm." Halfborn pointed at me. "What about you all? You're alive, I see."

We told him the story of our night in the pottery studio and our morning destroying King's Square.

Mallory frowned at Alex, who was still covered in clay. "That would explain Fierro's new coat of paint."

"And the rock in T.J.'s head." Halfborn leaned closer to inspect the shrapnel. T.J.'s forehead had stopped bleeding. The swelling was down. But for reasons unknown, the sliver of flint still refused to come out. Whenever I tried to pull it, T.J. yelped in pain. Fixed above his eyebrow, the little shard gave him a look of permanent surprise.

"Does it hurt?" Halfborn asked.

"Not anymore," T.J. said sheepishly. "Not unless you try to remove it."

"Hold on, then." With his good hand, Halfborn rummaged through his belt pouch. He pulled out a box of matches, fumbled one free, then struck it against T.J.'s flint. The match burst into flames immediately.

"Hey!" T.J. complained.

"You have a new superpower, my friend!" Halfborn grinned. "That could be useful!"

"Right, enough of that," Mallory said. "Glad you all survived, but did you get information from the giant?"

"Yeah," Alex said, cradling the head of Pottery Barn. "Kvasir's Mead is in Norway. Some place called Fläm."

The lit match slipped from Halfborn's fingers and landed on the deck.

T.J. stomped out the flame. "You all right, big guy? You look like you've seen a draugr."

An earthquake seemed to be happening under Halfborn's whiskers.

"Jorvik was bad enough," he said. "Now Fläm? What are the odds?"

"You know the place," I guessed.

"I'm going below," he muttered.

"Want me to heal that arm first?"

He shook his head miserably, as if he was quite used to living with pain. Then he made his way down the ladder.

T.J. turned to Mallory. "What was that about?"

"Don't look at me," she snapped. "I'm not his keeper."

But there was a twinge of concern in her voice.

"Let's get under way," Samirah suggested. "I don't want to be on this river any longer than we have to."

On that, we all agreed. York was pretty. It had good fish and chips and at least one decent pottery studio, but I was ready to get out of there.

Alex and T.J. went below to change clothes and rest up from their morning of combat. That left Mallory, Sam, and me to man the ship. It took us the rest of the day to navigate our way down the River Ouse and back out to sea, but the voyage was mercifully uneventful. No water horses stampeded us. No giants challenged us to combat or bingo. The worst thing we encountered was a low bridge, forcing us to fold down the mainmast, which may or may not have collapsed on top of me.

At sunset, as we left the coast of England behind, Sam did her ritual washing. She prayed facing southwest, then sat down next to me with a satisfied sigh and unwrapped a package of dates.

She passed me one, then took a bite of hers. She closed her eyes as she chewed, her face transformed by pure bliss like the fruit was a religious experience. Which I guess it was.

“Every sunset,” she said, “the taste of that date is like experiencing the joy of food for the first time. The flavor just explodes in your mouth.”

I chewed my date. It was okay. It did not explode or fill me with bliss. Then again, I hadn’t worked for it by fasting all day.

“Why dates?” I asked. “Why not, like, Twizzlers?”

“Just tradition.” She took another bite and made a contented *mmm*. “The Prophet Muhammad always broke fast by eating a few dates.”

“But you can have other stuff afterward, right?”

“Oh, yes,” she said gravely. “I intend to eat *all* the food. I understand Alex brought back some cherry soda? I want to try that as well.”

I shuddered. I could escape giants, countries, and even whole worlds, but it seemed I was never going to get away from Tizer. I had nightmares about all my friends grinning at me with red lips and cherry-tinted teeth.

While Sam went below to eat all the food, Mallory lounged at the rudder, keeping an eye on the horizon, though the ship seemed to know where we were going. From time to time, she touched her shoulders where her hair used to fall, then sighed unhappily.

I sympathized. Not long ago, Blitz had hacked off my hair to make magic embroidering thread for a bowling bag. I still had traumatic flashbacks.

“Sailing to Norway will take us a few days,” Mallory said. “The North Sea can get pretty rough. Unless anybody has a friendly sea god they can

call on.”

I focused on my date. I wasn’t about to call for Njord’s help again. I’d seen enough of my granddad’s beautiful feet for one eternal lifetime. But I remembered what he had told me: After Jorvik, we were on our own. No divine protection. If Aegir or Ran or their daughters found us...

“Maybe we’ll get lucky,” I said weakly.

Mallory snorted. “Yep. That happens a lot. Even if we get to Fläm safely, what’s this business about the mead having unbeatable guardians?”

I wished I knew. *Guardians of the Mead* sounded like another book I never wanted to read.

I recalled my dream of Odin offering me the whetstone, then his face morphing into something else: a leathery visage with green eyes and rows of teeth. I’d never faced a creature like that in real life, but the cold rage in its gaze had seemed uncomfortably, terrifyingly familiar. I thought about Hearthstone and Blitzen, and where Njord might have sent them to search for a rare stone. An idea began to coalesce, swirling into symmetry like a lump of clay on Alex’s wheel, but I didn’t like the shape it was taking on.

“We’ll need the whetstone to defeat the guardians,” I said. “I have no idea why. We just have to trust—”

Mallory laughed. “Trust? Right. I’ve got as much of that as I have luck.”

She drew one of her knives. Casually, holding the blade by the tip, she threw the knife at my feet. It impaled the yellow planking and quivered there like a Geiger-counter needle.

“Take a look,” she offered. “See why I don’t trust ‘secret weapons.’”

I pulled the knife from the deck. I’d never held one of Mallory’s weapons before. The blade was surprisingly light—so light it might get you into trouble. If you handled it like a standard dagger, wielding it with more force than necessary, this was the kind of knife that could leap out of your hand and cut your own face off.

The blade was a long, dark isosceles triangle etched with runes and Celtic knot designs, the handle wrapped in soft worn leather.

I wasn’t sure what Mallory wanted me to notice about it, so I just said the obvious: “Nice blade.”

“Eh.” From her belt, Mallory unsheathed its twin. “They aren’t as sharp as Jack. They don’t do anything magical, as far as I can tell. They were

supposed to save my life, but as you can see”—she spread her arms—“I’m dead.”

“So...you had the knives when you were alive.”

“For the last five, six minutes of my life, yeah.” She twirled the blade between her fingers. “First my mates...they goaded me into setting the bomb.”

“Hold on. You set the—”

She cut me off with a harsh look, like *Never interrupt a lady with a knife.*

“That was Loki, egging me on,” she said. “His voice among my crew—the trickster disguised as one of us. Didn’t realize that at the time, of course. Then, after I did the deed, my conscience got the better of me. That’s when the old hag appeared.”

I waited. I’ll admit I wasn’t following Mallory’s story very well. I knew she had died disarming a car bomb, but a car bomb she had set *herself?* Seeing her as somebody who would do that was even harder than seeing her with short hair. I had no idea who I was looking at.

She brushed away a tear as if it were an annoying insect. “The hag says, ‘Oh, girl. Follow your heart.’ Blah, blah. Nonsense like that. She gives me these knives. Tells me they are indestructible. Can’t be dulled. Can’t be broken. And she’s right about that, far as I can tell. But she also says, ‘You’ll need them. Use them well.’ And I go back to—to undo what I did. I waste time, trying to figure out how these bloody daggers are supposed to solve my problem. But they don’t. And...” She opens her fingertips in a silent explosion.

My head buzzed. I had a lot of questions I was afraid to ask. Why had she set that bomb? Who was she trying to blow up? Was she completely insane?

She sheathed her knife, then gestured for me to throw her the other. I was afraid I might accidentally toss it overboard or kill her, but she caught it easily.

“The hag was also Loki,” she said. “Had to be. Wasn’t enough for him to fool me once. He had to fool me twice and get me killed.”

“Why did you keep the daggers then, if they’re from Loki?”

Her eyes glistened. “Because, my friend, when I see him again, I’m going to sheathe these blades right in his throat.”

She put the second dagger away, and I exhaled for the first time in several minutes.

“Point is, Magnus,” she said, “I wouldn’t put my faith in any magic weapon, knife or otherwise, to solve all our problems—whether it’s Kvasir’s Mead, or this whetstone that’s supposed to get us the mead. In the end, all that counts is us. Whatever Blitzen and Hearthstone are off searching for—”

As if their names were an incantation, a wave surged out of nowhere, crashing across the ship’s bow. Out of the sea spray stumbled two weary figures. Our elf and dwarf had returned.

“Well, well.” Mallory got to her feet, wiping away another tear. She forced some cheerfulness into her tone. “Nice of you boys to drop by.”

Blitzen was covered head to toe in anti-sun protection gear. Salt water glittered on his dark trench coat and gloves. Black netting circled the rim of his pith helmet, obscuring his expression until he lifted the veil. His facial muscles twitched. He blinked repeatedly, like someone who had just walked away from a car accident.

Hearthstone sat down right where he was. He draped his hands over his knees and shook his head, *No, no, no*. Somehow, he’d lost his scarf, leaving his outfit as black as hearse upholstery.

“You’re alive,” I said, dizzy with relief. My stomach had been knotted up for days worrying about them. Yet now, looking at their shocked expressions, I couldn’t savor having them back.

“You found what you were looking for,” I guessed.

Blitzen swallowed. “I—I’m afraid so, kid. Njord was right. We’re going to need your help for the hard stuff.”

“Alfheim.” I wanted to say it before he could, just to take the sting out of the word. I hoped I was wrong. I would have preferred a trip to the wildest corner of Jotunheim, the fires of Muspellheim, or even a public bathroom in Boston’s South Station.

“Yeah,” Blitzen agreed. He glanced at Mallory Keen. “Dear heart, would you let your friends know? We need to borrow Magnus. Hearthstone has to face his father one last time.”



## Follow the Smell of Dead Frogs (to the Tune of “Follow the Yellow Brick Road”)

### WHAT WAS it about dads?

Almost everyone I knew had a garbage father, like they were all competing for the Worst Dad of the Universe award.

I was lucky. I'd never met my dad until last winter. Even then I'd only talked to him for a few minutes. But at least Frey seemed cool. We hugged. He let me keep his talking disco sword and sent me a bright yellow boat in my time of need.

Sam had Loki, who put the *con* in *conniving*. Alex's dad was an abusive raging butt-hat with dreams of global dishware domination. And Hearthstone...he had it worse than any of us. Mr. Alderman had made Hearthstone's childhood a living Helheim. I never wanted to spend another night under that man's roof, and I'd only been there once. I couldn't imagine how Hearthstone would bear it.

We fell out of the golden sky, the way one does when tumbling into the airy world of the elves. We landed gently on the street in front of the Alderman mansion. As before, the wide suburban lane stretched out in either direction, hedged with stone walls and carefully tended trees, obscuring the elf millionaires' multi-acre estates from one another. The weak gravity made the ground seem squishy under my feet, as if I could trampoline right back into the stratosphere. (I was tempted to try.)

The sunlight was as harsh as I remembered, making me grateful for the dark glasses Alex had lent me, even if they did have thick pink Buddy Holly frames. (There had been much snickering about this aboard the *Big Banana*.)

Why we had left Midgard at sunset and arrived in Alfheim during what looked like early afternoon, I wasn't sure. Maybe the elves observed Alf-light Saving Time.

Alderman's elaborate gates still gleamed with their filigreed A monogram. On either side, the high walls still bristled with spikes and barbed wire to discourage riffraff. But now the security cameras were dark and motionless. The gates were laced shut with a chain and padlock. On either side of the gates, nailed to the brick columns, were matching yellow signs with glaring red letters:

PROPERTY OFF-LIMITS  
BY ORDER OF ALFHEIM POLICE DEPARTMENT  
TRESPASSERS WILL DIE

Not prosecuted. Not arrested or shot. That simple warning—step inside these boundaries and you'll die—was much more sinister.

My gaze wandered over the grounds, which were roughly the size of the Boston Public Garden. Since our last visit, the grass had grown high and wild in the rich Alfheim light. Spiky balls of moss festooned the trees. The pungent smell of scum from the swan lake came wafting through the gates.

The half-mile driveway was littered with white feathers, possibly from the aforementioned swans; bones and tufts of fur that might have once been squirrels or raccoons; and a single black dress shoe that looked as if it had been chewed and spit out.

At the top of the hill, the once imposing Alderman Manor lay in ruins. The left side of the complex had collapsed in a heap of rubble, girders, and charred beams. Kudzu vines had completely overtaken the right side, growing so heavy that the roof had caved in. Only two picture windows remained intact, their glass panes smoked brown around the edges from the fire. Glinting in the sun, they reminded me uncomfortably of T.J.'s sniper glasses.

I turned to my friends. "Did we do this?"

I felt more amazement than guilt. The last time we fled Alfheim, we'd been pursued by evil water spirits and elfish police with guns, not to mention Hearth's maniacal father. We may have busted a few windows in

the process of escaping. I supposed it was possible we'd caused a fire to break out, too. If so, it couldn't have happened to a viler mansion.

But still...I didn't understand how the place could have been so thoroughly destroyed, or how quickly such a suburban paradise had turned into this creepy wilderness.

"We only started it." Blitzen's face was again covered by netting, making it impossible to read his expression. "This destruction is the ring's fault."

In the harsh warm light, it shouldn't have been possible to get a chill. Nevertheless, ice trickled down my back. On our last visit, Hearth and I had stolen a hoard of gold from a slimy old dwarf, Andvari, including the little dude's cursed ring. He'd tried to warn us that the ring would only bring misery, but had we listened? Nooooo. At the time, we'd been more focused on stuff like, oh, saving Blitzen's life. The only thing that could do that was the Skofnung Stone in Mr. Alderman's possession. His price for it? A gazillion dollars in gold, because evil fathers don't take American Express.

Long story short: Alderman took the cursed ring. He put it on and turned even crazier and eviler, which I hadn't thought possible.

Personally, I liked my cursed rings to at least do something cool, like turn you invisible and let you see the Eye of Sauron. Andvari's ring had no upside. It brought out the worst in you—greed, hate, jealousy. According to Hearth, it would eventually change you into a bona fide monster so your outside could be as repulsive as your inside.

If the ring was still working its magic on Mr. Alderman, and if it had overtaken him as quickly as the wilderness had overtaken his estate...Yeah, that wasn't good.

I turned to Hearth. "Is your dad...is he still *in* there?"

Hearthstone's expression was grim and stoic, like a man who had finally accepted a terminal diagnosis. *Nearby*, he signed. *But not himself.*

"You don't mean..."

I stared at the chewed-up shoe in the drive. I wondered what had happened to its owner. I remembered my dream of large green eyes and rows of teeth. No, that couldn't be what Hearth meant. No cursed ring could work so fast, could it?

"You—you scouted around inside?" I asked.

"Afraid so." Blitz signed as he talked, since Hearth could not see his lips moving. "Alderman's whole collection of rare stones and artifacts—

gone. Along with all the gold. So, if the whetstone we're looking for was somewhere in that house—"

*It has been moved,* Hearthstone signed. *Part of his hoard.*

The sign Hearth used for *hoard* was a grasping fist in front of his chin, like he was clutching something valuable: *Treasure. Mine. Don't touch, or you'll die.*

I swallowed a mouthful of sand. "And...did you find this hoard?" I knew my friends were brave, but the idea of them poking around inside the walls of that estate terrified me. Definitely it hadn't been good for the local squirrel population.

"We think we found his lair," Blitz said.

"Oh, good." My voice sounded higher and softer than usual. "Alderman has a lair now. And, uh, did you see him?"

Hearthstone shook his head. *Only smelled him.*

"Okay," I said. "That's not creepy."

"You'll see," Blitz said. "It's easiest just to show you."

That was one offer I definitely wanted to refuse, but there was no way I would let Hearth and Blitz go through those gates again without me.

"W-why haven't the local elves done something about the estate?" I asked. "Last time we were here, they wouldn't even tolerate us loitering. Haven't the neighbors complained?"

I waved at the ruins. An eyesore like this, especially if it killed swans, rodents, and the occasional door-to-door sales elf, had to be against the rules of the neighborhood association.

"We talked to the authorities," Blitz said. "Half the time we've been gone, we've been dealing with elfish bureaucracy." He shuddered in his heavy coat. "Would it surprise you that the police didn't want to listen to us? We can't prove Alderman is dead or missing. Hearthstone doesn't have any legal rights to the land. As for clearing the property, the best the police would do is put up those stupid warning signs. They aren't going to risk their necks, no matter how much the neighbors complain. Elves pretend to be sophisticated, but they're as superstitious as they are arrogant. Not all elves, of course. Sorry, Hearth."

Hearthstone shrugged. *Can't blame the police,* he signed. *Would you go in there if you didn't have to?*

He had a point. Just the thought of traipsing through the property, unable to see whatever lurked in the tall grass, made jumping beans hop

around in my stomach. The Alfheim police were great at bullying transients out of the neighborhood. Facing an actual threat in the ruins of a madman's mansion...maybe not so much.

Blitzen sighed. "Well, no sense waiting. Let's go find dear old Dad."

I would have preferred another dinner with Aegir's murderous daughters, or a battle to the death with a pile of pottery. Heck, I would have even shared guava juice with a pack of wolves on Uncle Randolph's roof deck.

We climbed the gates and picked our way through the tall grass. Mosquitoes and gnats swarmed in our faces. The sunlight made my skin prickle and my pores pop with sweat. I decided Alfheim was a pretty world as long as it was manicured and trimmed and kept up by the servants. Allowed to go wild, it went wild in a *big* way. I wondered if elves were similar. Calm, delicate, and formal on the outside, but if they let loose...I really did *not* want to meet the new-and-unimproved Mr. Alderman.

We skirted the ruins of the house, which was fine by me. I remembered too well the blue fur rug in Hearthstone's old room, which we'd been forced to cover with gold to pay the wergild for his brother's death. I remembered the menu board of infractions on Hearthstone's wall, keeping tally of his never-ending debt to his dad. I didn't want to get near that place again, even if it was in ruins.

As we picked our way through the backyard, something crunched under my foot. I looked down. My shoe had gone straight through the rib cage of a small deer skeleton.

"Ugh," I said.

Hearthstone frowned at the desiccated remains. Nothing but a few strips of meat and fur clung to the bones.

*Eaten*, he signed, putting his closed fingertips under his mouth. The sign was very similar to *hoard/treasure*. Sometimes sign language was a little too accurate for my liking.

With a silent apology to the poor deer, I freed my foot. I couldn't tell what might have devoured the animal, but I hoped the prey hadn't suffered much. I was surprised wildlife that large was even allowed to exist in the tonier neighborhoods of Alfheim. I wondered if the cops harassed the deer for loitering, maybe cuffing their little hooves and shoving them into the backs of squad cars.

We made our way toward the woods at the back of the property. The grounds had become so overgrown I couldn't tell where the lawn stopped and the underbrush began. Gradually, the canopy of trees grew thicker, until the sunlight was reduced to yellow buckshot across the forest floor.

I estimated we weren't far from the old well where Hearthstone's brother had died—another place high on my Never Visit Again list. So, naturally, we stumbled right into it.

A cairn of stones covered the spot where the well had been filled in. Not a weed or blade of grass grew in the barren dirt, as if even they didn't want to invade such a poisoned clearing. Still, I had no trouble imagining Hearthstone and Andiron playing here as children—Hearth's back turned as he happily stacked rocks, not hearing his brother scream when the *brunnmigi*, the beast who lived in the well, rose from the darkness.

I started to say, "We don't have to be here—"

Hearth walked to the cairn as if in a trance. Sitting at the top of the pile, where Hearthstone had left it during our last visit, was a runestone:



*Othala*, the rune of family inheritance. Hearthstone had insisted he would never use that rune again. Its meaning had died for him in this place. Even his new set of rowan runes, the ones he'd received as a gift from the goddess Sif, did not contain othala. Sif had warned him this would cause him trouble. Eventually, she'd said, he would have to return here to reclaim his missing piece.

I hated it when goddesses were right.

*Should you take it?* I signed. In a place like this, silent conversation seemed better than using my voice.

Hearthstone frowned, his gaze defiant. He made a quick chopping gesture—sideways then down, like he was tracing a backward question mark. *Never.*

Blitzen sniffed the air. *We're close now. Smell it?*

I smelled nothing except the faint scent of rotting plant matter. *What?*

"Yeesh," he said aloud. *Human noses are pathetic.*

*Useless*, Hearthstone agreed. He led the way deeper into the forest.

We didn't make for the river, as we had last time to find Andvari's gold. This time we moved roughly parallel to the water, picking our way through

briars and the gnarled roots of giant oak trees.

After another quarter mile, I started to smell what Hearth and Blitz had talked about. I had a flashback to my eighth-grade biology class, when Joey Kelso hid our teacher's frog habitat in the ceiling tiles. It wasn't discovered until a month later, when the glass terrarium crashed back into the classroom and broke all over the teacher's desk, spraying the front row with glass, mold, slime, and rancid amphibian bodies.

What I smelled in the forest reminded me of that, except *much* worse.

Hearthstone stopped at the edge of another clearing. He crouched behind a fallen tree and gestured for us to join him.

*In there, he signed. Only place he could have gone.*

I peered through the gloom. The trees around the clearing had been reduced to charcoal stick figures. The ground was thick with rotting mulch and animal bones. About fifty feet from our hiding place rose an outcropping of boulders, two of the largest rocks leaning together to form what looked like the entrance of a cave.

"Now we wait," Blitz whispered as he signed, "for what passes for nighttime in this dwarf-forsaken place."

Hearth nodded. *He will emerge at night. Then we see.*

I was having a hard time breathing, much less thinking in the miasma of dead-frog stench. Staying here sounded like a terrible idea.

*Who's going to emerge? I signed. Your dad? From there? Why?*

Hearthstone looked away. I got the feeling he was trying to be merciful by not answering my questions.

"We'll find out," Blitz murmured. "If it's what we fear... Well, let's enjoy our ignorance while we still can."



TWENTY-FOUR

## I Liked Hearthstone's Dad Better as a Cow-Abducting Alien

WHILE WE waited, Hearthstone provided us with dinner.  
From his rune bag, he drew this symbol:



It looked like a regular *X* to me, but Hearthstone explained it was *gebo*, the rune of gifts. In a flash of gold light, a picnic basket appeared, overflowing with fresh bread, grapes, a wheel of cheese, and several bottles of sparkling water.

"I like gifts," I said, keeping my voice low. "But won't the smell draw...uh, unwanted attention?" I pointed to the cave entrance.

"Doubtful," said Blitzen. "The smell coming out of that cave is more powerful than anything in this basket. But just to be safe, let's eat everything quickly."

"I like the way you think," I said.

Blitzen and I dug in, but Hearth merely settled himself behind the fallen tree trunk and watched us.

"Not eating?" I asked him.

He shook his head. *Not hungry*, he signed. *Also, g-e-b-o makes gifts. Not for the giver. For giver, it must be sacrifice.*

"Oh." I looked down at the wedge of cheese I'd been about to shove in my mouth. "That doesn't seem fair."

Hearthstone shrugged, then motioned for us to continue. I didn't like the idea of him sacrificing so we could eat dinner. Just him being back home, waiting for his father to emerge from a cave, seemed like sacrifice enough. He didn't need his very own Ramadan rune.

On the other hand, it would've been rude to refuse his gift. So, I ate.

As the sun sank, the shadows lengthened. I knew from experience that Alfheim never got fully dark. Like Alaska in summer, the sun would just dip to the horizon and pop back up again. Elves were creatures of light, which was proof that *light* did not equal *good*. I'd met plenty of elves (Hearth excepted) who proved that.

The gloom intensified, but not enough for Blitz to take off his anti-sun gear. It must have been a thousand degrees inside that heavy jacket, but he didn't complain. Once in a while he pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed under his netting, wiping the sweat from his neck.

Hearthstone fidgeted with something on his wrist—a bracelet of woven blond hair that I'd never seen before. The color of the locks seemed vaguely familiar....

I tapped his hand for attention. *Is that from Inge?*

Hearth winced, like this was an awkward subject. On our last visit, Mr. Alderman's long-suffering house servant Inge had helped us a lot. A *hulder*, a sort of elf with the tail of a cow, she'd known Hearth since they were both kids. As it turned out, she also had a massive crush on him, even kissing him on the cheek and declaring her love before she fled the chaos of Mr. Alderman's last party.

*We visited her a few days ago,* Hearth signed. *While scouting. She is living with her family now.*

Blitz sighed in exasperation, which, of course, Hearth couldn't hear.

*Inge is a good lady,* the dwarf signed. *But...* He made Vs with both hands and circled them in front of his forehead, like he was pulling things out of his mind. In this context, I imagined the sign meant something like *delusional*.

Hearthstone frowned. *Not fair. She tried to help. Hulder bracelet is good luck.*

*If you say so,* Blitz signed.

*Glad she is safe,* I signed. *Is the bracelet magic?*

Hearth started to respond. Then his hands froze. He sniffed the air and gestured *DOWN!*

The birds had stopped chattering in the trees. The whole forest seemed to be holding its breath.

We crouched lower, our eyes barely peeking over the top of the fallen tree. On my next inhalation, I got such a snootful of dead-frog stench I had to repress a gag.

Just inside the cave entrance, twigs and dry leaves crackled under the weight of something huge.

The hairs on my neck quivered. I wished I had summoned Jack so I would be ready to fight if needed, but Jack wasn't good in stakeout situations, what with his tendency to glow and sing.

Then, from the doorway of the cave came...*Oh, gods of Asgard.*

I'd been holding out hope that Alderman had turned into something not so bad. Maybe his cursed form was a Weimaraner puppy, or a chuckwalla iguana. Of course, deep down I'd known the truth all along. I just hadn't wanted to admit it.

Hearth had told me horror stories about what happened to previous thieves who dared to take Andvari's ring. Now I saw that he hadn't been bluffing.

Emerging from the cave was a beast so hideous I couldn't comprehend it all at once.

First I focused on the ring glinting on its middle right fore-toe—a tiny band of gold biting into the scaly flesh. It must have hurt badly, throbbing like a tourniquet. The end of the toe had blackened and shriveled.

The monster's four feet were each the diameter of a trash-can lid. Its short thick legs dragged along a lizard-like body, maybe fifty feet from nose to tail, its spine ridged with spikes bigger than my sword.

The face I had seen in my dreams: glowing green eyes, a snub-nosed snout with slimy nostrils, a horrible maw with rows of triangular teeth. Its head was maned with green quills. The monster's mouth reminded me of Fenris Wolf's—too large and expressive for a beast, its lips too human. Worst of all: tufts of white clung to its forehead—the last remnants of Mr. Alderman's once-impressive hair.

The new, dragonish Alderman pulled himself from his lair, muttering, grinning, snarling, then cackling hysterically—all for no apparent reason.

"No, Mr. Alderman," he hissed. "You mustn't leave, sir!"

With a roar of frustration, he belched a column of fire across the forest floor, roasting the trunks of the nearest trees. The heat made my eyebrows

crinkle like rice paper.

I didn't dare move. I couldn't even look at my friends to see how they were taking this.

Now you may be thinking *Magnus, you've seen dragons before. What was the big deal?*

Okay, sure. I'd seen the occasional dragon. I even fought an elder lindworm once.

But I'd never faced a dragon that used to be someone I *knew*. I'd never seen a person transformed into something so awful, so smelly, so malevolent, and yet...so obviously *correct*. This was Mr. Alderman's true self, his worst qualities given flesh.

That terrified me. Not just the knowledge that this creature could broil us alive, but the idea that *anyone* could have this much monster inside them. I couldn't help but wonder...if I'd put on that ring, if the worst thoughts and failings of Magnus Chase had been given a form, what would've happened to me?

The dragon took another step, until only the tip of his tail remained in the cave. I held my breath. If the dragon went out to hunt, maybe we could dash into the cave while he was gone, find the whetstone we needed, and get out of Alfheim without a fight. I could've really gone for an easy win like that.

The dragon moaned. "So thirsty! The river isn't far, Mr. Alderman. Just a quick drink, perhaps?"

He chuckled to himself. "Oh, no, Mr. Alderman. Your neighbors are tricky. Posers! Wannabes! They'd *love* for you to leave your treasure unguarded. Everything you have worked so hard for—your wealth! Yours alone! No, sir. Back you go! Back!"

Hissing and spitting, the dragon retreated into his cave, leaving behind only dead-frog stench and a few smoldering trees.

I still couldn't move. I counted to fifty, waiting to see if the dragon would reemerge, but tonight's show seemed to be over.

Finally my muscles began to thaw. I sank back behind our log. My legs shook uncontrollably. I had an overwhelming urge to pee.

"Gods," I muttered. "Hearthstone, I..."

Words and sign language failed me. How could I commiserate, or even begin to understand what Hearthstone must be feeling?

He set his mouth in a hard line. His eyes glinted with steely determination, a look that reminded me too much of his father.

He made an open hand and tapped his thumb to his chest. *I'm fine.*

Sometimes you lie to deceive people. Sometimes you lie because you need the lie to become the truth. I guessed Hearth was doing the latter.

"Hey, buddy," Blitzen whispered as he signed. His voice sounded like it had been crushed under the weight of the dragon. "Magnus and I can figure this out. Let us take the hit."

The idea of Blitzen and me facing that monster alone didn't do much for my bladder problems, but I nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, sure. Maybe we can lure the dragon out and sneak in—"

*You're both wrong,* Hearthstone signed. *We must kill him. And I must help.*



TWENTY-FIVE

## We Devise a Fabulously Horrible Plan

### WORST PLACE for a council of war?

How about the collapsed well where Hearthstone's brother had died, in the middle of a creepy forest, in my least favorite of the Nine Worlds, where we could expect absolutely no backup?

Yep, that's where we went.

I brought out Jack and filled him in on the situation. For once, he did not squeal with excitement or burst into song.

"A ring dragon?" His runes dimmed to gray. "Oh, that's bad. Cursed rings always make the worst dragons."

I signed along for Hearth's benefit.

Hearthstone grunted. *The dragon has a weak spot. The belly.*

"What's he saying?" Jack asked.

Among Hearthstone's friends, Jack was a stubborn holdout when it came to learning to read ASL. He claimed the gestures didn't make sense to him because he didn't have hands. Personally, I thought it was just payback for Hearth not being able to read Jack's lips since, you know, Jack didn't have lips. Magic swords can be petty like that.

"He said the belly is the dragon's weak spot," I repeated.

"Oh, well, yeah." Jack sounded unenthused. "Their hide is almost impossible to cut, but they do have chinks in their belly armor. If you could somehow get the dragon to roll over—and good luck with that—you might be able to stab me through and reach his heart. But even if you could, have you ever pierced a ring dragon's belly? I have. It's gross. Their blood is acid!"

I translated all that for Hearth.

“Jack, did the blood damage you?” I asked.

“Of course not! I’m the Sword of Summer! I was forged with a magical finish that resists all wear and tear!”

Blitzen nodded. “It’s true. Jack’s got a nice finish.”

“Thank you,” Jack said. “Somebody here appreciates good workmanship! Piercing a dragon’s belly won’t damage *me*, but I’m thinking about *you*, señor. You get one drop of that blood on you while you’re cutting the dragon, and you’re done. That stuff will eat right through you. *Nothing* can stop it.”

I had to admit that didn’t sound fun. “Can’t you fight on your own, Jack? You could just fly up to the dragon and—”

“Ask him nicely if he will roll over?” Jack snorted, which sounded like a hammer hitting a corrugated metal roof. “Ring dragons crawl on their bellies for a reason, guys. They know better than to present their weak spot. Besides, killing a ring dragon is a very personal thing. You would have to wield me yourself. An act like that affects your *wyrd*.”

I frowned. “You mean it affects you weirdly?”

“No. Your *wyrd*.”

“*You’re* weird,” I muttered.

“He means *fate*,” Blitzen put in, signing as he spoke for Hearth’s benefit.

The sign for *fate* was one hand pushing forward, like everything was going along just fine, la-di-da, then both hands suddenly dropping into Blitz’s lap like they’d run into a wall and died. I may have mentioned that ASL can be a little too descriptive.

“When you kill a ring dragon,” Blitz said, “especially one who used to be someone you knew, you’re messing with serious magic. The dragon’s own curse can reverberate through your future, change the course of your destiny. It can...stain you.”

He said the word *stain* like it was worse than ketchup or grease—like dragon-killing wouldn’t come out of your *wyrd* even with a good presoaking.

Hearthstone signed in clipped gestures, the way he did when he was irritated: *Must be done. I will do it.*

“Buddy...” Blitz shifted uncomfortably. “This is your dad.”

*Not anymore.*

*Hearth, I signed. Some way to get whetstone without killing the dragon?*

He shook his head adamantly. *Not the point. Dragons can live for centuries. I can't leave him like that.*

His pale eyes moistened. With a shock, I realized he was crying. It may sound dumb, but elves were usually so in control and subdued about their emotions, it surprised me to know they were *capable* of tears.

Hearth wasn't just angry. He didn't want vengeance. Despite everything Alderman had done to him, Hearthstone didn't want his dad to suffer as a twisted monster. Sif had warned Hearth that he would have to come back here to reclaim his lost inheritance rune. That meant closing the sad story of his family, putting Mr. Alderman's tortured soul to rest.

"I get it," I said. "I do. But let me strike the killing blow. You shouldn't have that on your conscience, or your wyrd, or whatever."

"Kid's right," Blitz said. "It won't stain his destiny as badly. But you—killing your own dad, even if it's a mercy? Nobody should ever have to face a choice like that."

I thought Samirah and Alex might disagree. They might welcome the chance to put Loki out of our collective misery. But, generally speaking, I knew Blitz was right.

"Besides," Jack chimed in, "I'm the only blade that can do the job, and I wouldn't let the elf handle me!"

I decided not to translate that. "What do you say, Hearthstone? Will you let me do this?"

Hearthstone's hands hovered in front of him like he was about to play air piano. At last, he signed, *Thank you, Magnus*—a gesture like blowing a kiss, then a fist with the thumb under three fingers, *M*, my name sign.

Normally he wouldn't have bothered with my name. When you talk to somebody in ASL, it's obvious who you are addressing. You just look at them or point. Hearth used my name sign to show respect and love.

"I got you, man," I promised. My insides fluttered at the thought of killing the dragon, but there was no way I'd let Hearthstone take the fall for that act. His wyrd had already suffered enough, thanks to Mr. Alderman. "So how do we do this, preferably without acid dissolving me into a pile of Magnus foam?"

Hearth gazed at the cairn. His shoulders sagged, as if somebody were piling invisible rocks on top of him. *There is a way. Andiron...* He hesitated at his brother's name sign. *You know we used to play around here. There are tunnels, made by wild—* Here he used a sign I'd never seen before.

“He means *nisser*,” Blitzen explained. “They’re like...” He held his hand about two feet off the ground. “Little guys. They’re also called hobs. Or *di sma*. Or brownies.”

I guessed he didn’t mean the Girl Scout Junior type of brownie, or the baked chocolate kind.

*Hundreds used to live in the woods, Hearth signed, before Dad called exterminator.*

A chunk of bread swelled in my throat. A minute before, I hadn’t even known brownies existed. Now I felt sorry for them. I could imagine Mr. Alderman making the call. *Hello, Pest-Away? There’s a civilization in my backyard I’d like exterminated.*

“So...the brownies’ tunnels are still there?” I asked.

Hearth nodded. *They are narrow. But you could use one to crawl close to the cave. If we can taunt dragon to walk over the spot where you are hiding—*

“I could strike from beneath,” I said. “Right into its heart.”

Jack’s runes glowed an angry scarlet. “That’s a terrible idea! You’ll get showered with dragon’s blood!”

I wasn’t crazy about the idea either. Hiding in a tunnel made by exterminated brownies while a five-ton dragon dragged himself overhead presented all kinds of possibilities for a painful demise. On the other hand, I wasn’t going to let Hearthstone down. Getting the whetstone now seemed almost beside the point. I had to help my friend get free of his horrible past once and for all, even if it meant risking an acid bath.

“Let’s try a dry run,” I said. “If we can find a good tunnel, maybe I’ll be able to stab the dragon quickly and scramble to the exit before I get splashed.”

“Hmph.” Jack sounded awfully grumpy. Then again, I was asking him to slay a dragon. “I suppose that means you’d leave me stuck in the dragon’s heart?”

“Once the dragon’s dead, I’ll come back and get you...uh, assuming I can figure out how to do that without getting destroyed by acid.”

Jack sighed. “All right, I suppose the idea’s worth exploring. Just, if you live through this, you’ll have to promise to clean me really well afterward.”

Blitzen nodded, as if Jack’s priorities made perfect sense to him. “We’ll still need a way to draw the dragon out of his cave,” he said. “To make sure he crawls over the right spot.”

Hearth rose. He walked to his dead brother's cairn. He stared at it for a long while, as if wishing it would go away. Then, with trembling fingers, he reclaimed the othala rune. He held it out for us to see. He didn't sign, but his meaning was clear:

*Leave that to me.*

## Things Get Wyrd

IN VALHALLA, we spent a lot of time waiting.

We waited for our daily call to battle. We waited for our final glorious deaths at Ragnarok. We waited in line for tacos at the food court, because the Viking afterlife only had one taqueria, and Odin should really do something about that.

A lot of einherjar said waiting was the hardest part of our lives.

Normally, I disagreed. I was happy to wait for Ragnarok as long as possible, even if it meant long lines for my pollo asado fix.

But waiting to fight a dragon? Not my favorite thing.

We found a brownie tunnel easily enough. In fact, so many nisser holes peppered the forest floor I was surprised I hadn't broken my leg in one already. The tunnel we scouted had an exit in the woods outside the clearing, and another only thirty feet from the cave entrance. It was perfect, except for the fact that the passage was claustrophobic and muddy and smelled of—I am not making this up—baked brownies. I wondered if the exterminator had used a blowtorch to eliminate the poor little guys.

Carefully, quietly, we laid branches over the hole nearest the cave. That's where I would hide with my sword ready, waiting for the dragon to crawl over me. Then we did a few dry runs (which weren't very dry in that damp crawlspace) so I could practice jabbing upward with my blade and scrambling out of the tunnel.

On my third try, as I crawled out gasping and sweaty, Jack announced, "Twenty-one seconds. That's worse than last time! You'll be acid soup for sure!"

Blitzen suggested I try it again. He assured me we had time, since ring dragons were nocturnal, but we were operating so close to the dragon's lair I didn't want to push our luck. Also, I just didn't want to go back into that little hole.

We retreated to the cairn, where Hearthstone had been practicing his magic in private. He wouldn't tell us what he'd been doing or what he was planning. I figured the guy had been traumatized enough without me interrogating him. I just hoped his dragon lure worked, and he wasn't going to be the bait.

We waited for nightfall, taking turns napping. I couldn't sleep much, and when I did, my dreams were bad. I found myself back on the Ship of the Dead, though now the deck was strangely empty. In his admiral's uniform, Loki paced back and forth in front of me, tsking as if I'd failed a uniform inspection. "Sloppy, Magnus. Going after that silly whetstone with so little time remaining?" He got in my face, his eyes so close I could see flecks of fire in his irises. His breath smelled of venom poorly masked with peppermint. "Even if you find it, what then? Your uncle's idea is foolishness. You know you can never beat me." He tapped my nose. "Hope you've got a Plan B!"

His laughter crashed over me like an avalanche, knocking me to the deck, squeezing the air from my lungs. Suddenly I was back in the nisser tunnel, little brownie dudes frantically pushing at my head and feet, screaming as they tried to get past. The mud walls collapsed. Smoke stung my eyes. Flames roared at my feet, roasting my shoes. Above my head, drops of acid ate through the mud, sizzling all around my face.

I woke with a gasp. I couldn't stop shaking. I wanted to grab my friends and get out of Alfheim. Forget the stupid whetstone of Bolwerk. Forget Kvasir's Mead. We could find a Plan B. Any Plan B.

But the rational part of me knew that wasn't the answer. We were following the most insane, horrifying Plan A imaginable, which meant it was probably the right one. Just once I wished I could go on a quest that involved walking across the hall, pushing a SAVE THE WORLD button, and going back to my room for a few more hours' sleep.

Around sunset, we approached the dragon's lair. We'd now spent over a day in the forest, and we didn't smell so good. This brought back memories of our homeless days, the three of us huddled together in filthy sleeping bags in the alleys of Downtown Crossing. Ah, yes, the good ol' bad times!

My skin crawled with grime and sweat. I could only imagine how Blitz felt in his heavy anti-sun outfit. Hearthstone looked as clean and spotless as ever, though the Alfheim evening light tinted his hair the color of Tizer. As usual, being an elf, the most pungent body odor he produced was no worse than diluted Pine-Sol.

Jack weighed heavily in my hand. “Remember, señor, the heart is located at the *third* chink in the armor. You have to count the lines as the dragon drags itself overhead.”

“Assuming I can see?” I asked.

“I’ll glow for you! Just remember: stab quick and get out of there. That blood will shoot out like water from a fire hose—”

“Got it,” I said queasily. “Thanks.”

Blitzen clapped my shoulder. “Good luck, kid. I’ll be waiting at the exit to pull you out. Unless Hearth needs backup...”

He glanced at the elf as if hoping for more details besides *I have it covered*.

Hearthstone signed, *I have it covered*.

I took a shaky breath. “If you guys have to run, run. Don’t wait for me. And if—if I don’t make it, tell the others—”

“We’ll tell them,” Blitzen promised. He sounded like he knew what I wanted to say to everybody, which was good, because I didn’t. “But you *will* make it back.”

I hugged Hearth and Blitz, which they both tolerated despite my BO. Then, like a great hero of old, I crawled into my hole.

I wriggled through the nisser tunnel, my nose full of the smell of loam and burnt chocolate. When I reached the opening near the dragon’s lair, I balled myself up, grunting, shoving, and turning my legs until my head was facing the way I’d come. (As bad as crawling out of this tunnel would be, crawling out backward, feetfirst, would’ve been even worse.)

I lay faceup, staring at the sky through the lattice of branches. Carefully, so as not to kill myself, I summoned Jack. I positioned him along my left side, his hilt at my belt, his point resting against my collarbone. When I stabbed upward, the angle would be tricky. Using my right hand, I would have to lever the sword diagonally, guide the tip to the chink in the dragon’s belly armor, then thrust it through, into the dragon’s heart, with all my einherji strength. After that, I’d have to scramble out of the tunnel before I was sautéed in acid.

The job seemed impossible. Probably because it was.

Time passed slowly in the muddy tunnel. My only companions were Jack and a few earthworms that were crawling across my calves, checking out my socks.

I started to think the dragon wouldn't go out for dinner. Maybe he'd call for pizza instead. Then I'd end up with an elfish Domino's delivery guy falling on my face. I was about to lose hope when Alderman's putrid smell hit me like a thousand burning frogs kamikaze-diving into my nostrils.

Above, the woven branches rattled as the dragon emerged from his cave.

"I'm thirsty, Mr. Alderman," he growled to himself. "And hungry, too. Inge hasn't served me a proper dinner in days, weeks, months? Where is that worthless girl?"

He dragged himself closer to my hiding place. Dirt rained on my chest. My lungs constricted as I waited for the whole tunnel to collapse on top of me.

The dragon's snout eclipsed my hole. All he had to do was look down and he'd see me. I'd be toasted like a nisser.

"I can't leave," Mr. Alderman muttered. "The treasure must be guarded! The neighbors, can't trust them!"

He snarled in frustration. "Back, then, Mr. Alderman. Back to your duties!"

Before he could retreat, from somewhere in the woods a bright flash of light painted the dragon's snout amber—the color of Hearthstone's rune magic.

The dragon hissed. Smoke curled between his teeth. "What was that? Who is there?"

"*Father.*" The voice turned my marrow to ice. The sound echoed, weak and plaintive, like a child calling from the bottom of a well.

"NO!" The dragon stomped on the ground, shaking the earthworms off my socks. "Impossible! You are not here!"

"*Come to me, Father,*" the voice pleaded again.

I'd never known Andiron, Hearth's dead brother, but I guessed I was hearing his voice. Had Hearthstone used the othala rune to summon an illusion, or had he managed something even more terrible? I wondered where elves went when they died, and if their spirits could be brought back to haunt the living....

*“I have missed you,”* said the child.

The dragon howled in agony. He blew fire across my hiding place, aiming for the sound of the voice. All the oxygen was sucked from my chest. I fought down the impulse to gasp. Jack buzzed gently against my side for moral support.

*“I am here, Father,”* the voice persisted. *“I want to save you.”*

“Save me?” The dragon edged forward.

Veins pulsed on the underside of his scaly green throat. I wondered if I could stab him in the gullet. It looked like a soft target. But it was too far above me, out of my blade’s reach. Also, Jack and Hearthstone had been very specific: I had to aim for the heart.

“Save me from what, my precious boy?” The dragon’s tone was tortured and ragged, almost human—or rather almost *elfish*. “How can you be here? He killed you!”

“No,” said the child. *“He sent me to warn you.”*

The dragon’s snout quivered. He lowered his head like a threatened dog. “He—he sent you? He is your enemy. My enemy!”

“No, Father,” said Andiron. *“Please, listen. He has given me a chance to persuade you. We can be together in the next life. You can redeem yourself, save yourself, if you willingly give up the ring—”*

“THE RING! I knew it! Show yourself, deceiver!”

The dragon’s neck was so close now. I could slide Jack’s blade right up to his carotid artery and—Jack hummed a warning in my mind: *No. Not yet.*

I wished I could see what was happening at the edge of the clearing. I realized Hearth had not just created a magic distraction. He had summoned the spirit of Andiron, hoping against hope that his brother might be able to save their father from his wretched fate. Even now, after all Alderman had done to him, Hearthstone was willing to give his dad a chance at redemption, even if it meant standing in his brother’s shadow one last time.

The clearing grew still and silent. In the distance, briars rustled.

Alderman hissed. “YOU.”

I could only imagine one person Alderman would address with so much familiar contempt. Hearthstone must have revealed himself.

*“Father,”* pleaded Andiron’s ghost. *“Do not do this—”*

“Worthless Hearthstone!” the dragon cried. “You dare use magic to sully your brother’s memory?”

A pause. Hearthstone must have signed something, because Alderman bellowed in reply, “Use your board!”

I clenched my teeth. As if Hearth would carry around that awful little board Alderman used to make him write on—not because Alderman couldn’t read ASL, but because he enjoyed making his son feel like a freak.

“I will kill you,” the dragon said. “You *dare* try to trick me with this grotesque charade?”

He barreled forward—too fast for me to react. His belly covered the nisser hole and plunged me into darkness. Jack lit his runes, illuminating the tunnel, but I was already disoriented from fear and shock. An opening in the dragon’s belly armor appeared just above me, but I had no idea how much of his body had charged past. If I struck now, would I hit his heart? His gallbladder? His lower intestine?

Jack hummed in my mind: *No good! That’s the sixth chink! The dragon needs to back up!*

I wondered if Mr. Alderman would respond to a politely worded request. I doubted it.

The dragon had stopped moving. Why? The only reason I could think of: Alderman was in the process of chewing Hearthstone’s face off. I panicked. I almost stabbed the beast in the sixth chink, desperate to get the dragon off my friend. Then, through the muffling bulk of the monster’s body, I heard a mighty voice yell:

“BACK OFF!”

My first thought: Odin himself had appeared in front of the dragon. He had intervened to save Hearthstone’s life so that his rune-magic training sessions would not go to waste. That commanding roar was so loud it *had* to be Odin. I’d heard jotun war horns less forceful.

The voice boomed again: “GET AWAY, YOU FOUL, SMELLY EXCUSE FOR A FATHER!”

Now I recognized the accent—a little Southie with a hint of Svartalf.

Oh, no. No, no, no. It wasn’t Odin.

“YOU’RE NOT GETTING ANYWHERE CLOSE TO MY FRIEND, SO PUT YOUR SMELLY DEAD-FROG CARCASS IN REVERSE!”

With crystal clarity, I envisioned the scene: the dragon, stunned and perplexed, stopped cold in his tracks by a new opponent. How such small lungs could possibly produce so much volume, I had no idea. But I was

certain that the only thing standing between Hearthstone and fiery death was a well-dressed dwarf in a pith helmet.

I should have been amazed, impressed, inspired. Instead, I wanted to cry. As soon as the dragon recovered his senses, I knew he would kill my friends. He would blowtorch Blitzen and Hearthstone and leave nothing for me to clean up but a pile of fashionable ashes.

“GO!” Blitz bellowed.

Amazingly, Alderman slid backward, revealing the fifth chink in his armor.

Maybe he wasn’t used to being spoken to in such a manner. Perhaps he feared some sort of terrible demon was hiding under Blitz’s black mosquito netting.

“BACK TO YOUR SMELLY CAVE!” Blitzen yelled. “HYAH!”

The dragon snarled, but he retreated one more chink. Jack hummed in my hands, ready to do our job. Just one more section of belly armor to go...

“He’s only a stupid dwarf, Mr. Alderman,” the dragon muttered to himself. “He wants your ring.”

“I DON’T CARE ABOUT YOUR STUPID RING!” Blitz yelled.  
“SCAT!”

Maybe the dragon was stunned by Blitzen’s earnestness. Or maybe Alderman was confused by the sight of Blitzen standing in front of Hearthstone and the ghost of Andiron, like a father protecting his young. That instinct would have made as little sense to Alderman as a person who wasn’t motivated by greed.

He scooted back another few inches. Almost there...

“The dwarf is no threat, sir,” the dragon assured himself. “He’ll make a tasty dinner.”

“YOU THINK SO?” Blitz roared. “TRY ME!”

*Hiss.*

Alderman retreated another inch. The third chink came into view.

Fumbling and panicked, I positioned Jack’s point against the weak spot in the hide.

Then, with all my strength, I drove the sword into the dragon’s chest.

## We Win a Small Rock

I'D LIKE TO tell you I had qualms about leaving Jack buried up to his hilt in dragon flesh.

I didn't. My hand left the grip and I was *out* of there—scrambling down the tunnel like a brownie on fire. The dragon roared and stomped above me, shaking the earth. The tunnel collapsed behind me, sucking at my feet, filling the air with acidic fumes.

*Yikes!* I thought. *Yikes, yikes, yikes!*

I am eloquent in times of danger.

The crawl seemed to take much longer than twenty-one seconds. I didn't dare breathe. I imagined that my legs were burning off. If I made it out, I would look down and realize I was a sawed-off Magnus.

Finally, black spots dancing in my eyes, I clawed my way out of the tunnel. I gasped and flailed, kicking off my shoes and jeans as if they were poison. Because they were. As I'd feared, dragon blood had splattered my pants and was sizzling through the denim. My shoes smoked. I dragged my bare legs across the forest floor, hoping to smear off any remaining drops of blood. When I checked my feet and the backs of my calves, I saw nothing wrong. No new craters in my flesh. No smoke. No smell of burning einherji.

I could only guess that the collapsing tunnel had saved me, the mud mixing with the acid to slow down the tide of corrosion. Or maybe I'd just used up my luck for the next century.

My heart hammered at a less frantic pace. I staggered into the clearing and found the green dragon Alderman lying on his side, tail flopping, legs

twitching. He vomited up a feeble blast of napalm, torching a swath of dead leaves and squirrel skeletons.

Jack's hilt protruded from the dragon's chest. My former hiding place was now a steaming sinkhole, slowly eating its way to the core of Alfheim.

At the dragon's snout stood Hearthstone and Blitzen, both unharmed. Next to them, flickering like a weak candle flame, was the specter of Andiron. I'd only seen Hearth's brother once before, in the portrait above their father's fireplace. That painting had made him look like a young god, perfect and confident, tragically beautiful. What I saw in front of me, though, was just a boy—fair-haired, skinny, knobby-kneed. I wouldn't have picked him out of a lineup of elementary schoolers unless I was trying to identify kids likely to be bullied.

Blitz had raised the front of his anti-sun netting, despite the risk of petrification. The skin around his eyes was starting to turn gray. His expression was grim.

The dragon managed to draw a ragged breath. "Traitor. Murderer."

Blitzen balled his fists. "You've got some nerve—"

Hearthstone touched his sleeve. *Stop*. He knelt next to the dragon's face so Alderman could see him signing.

*I did not want this*, Hearthstone signed. *I am sorry*.

The dragon's lips curled over his fangs. "Use. Your. Board. Traitor."

Alderman's inner eyelid shut, filming over his greasy green iris. A final plume of smoke escaped his nostrils. Then Alderman's massive body went still.

I waited for him to return to elfish form. He didn't.

His corpse seemed perfectly content to stay a dragon.

Hearthstone rose. His expression was distant and confused—as if he'd just watched a movie made by an alien civilization and was trying to figure out what it meant.

Blitzen turned to me. "You did good, kid. It had to happen."

I stared at him in amazement. "You faced down a dragon. You made him back off."

Blitzen shrugged. "I don't like bullies." He pointed at my legs. "We might need to get you some new pants, kid. Dark khakis would go with that shirt. Or gray denim."

I understood why he wanted to change the subject. He didn't want to talk about how brave he'd been. He didn't see his actions as praiseworthy. It

was simply a fact: you didn't mess with Blitzen's bestie.

Hearthstone faced the ghost of his brother.

Andiron signed, *We tried, Hearth. Don't blame yourself.* His features were hazy, but his expression was unmistakable. Unlike Mr. Alderman, Andiron felt nothing but love for his brother.

Hearth wiped his eyes. He stared into the woods as if trying to find his bearings, then signed to Andiron, *I don't want to lose you again.*

*I know,* the ghost gestured. *I don't want to go.*

*Father—*

Andiron chopped his palm, the symbol for *stop*.

*Don't waste another minute on him,* Andiron said. *He took enough of your life. Will you eat his heart?*

That made no sense, so I figured I must have interpreted the signs wrong.

Hearth's face darkened. He signed, *I don't know.*

Andiron gestured, *Come here.*

Hearthstone hesitated. He edged closer to the ghost.

*I will tell you a secret,* Andiron said. *When I whispered into that well, I made a wish. I wanted to be as kind and good as you, brother. You are perfect.*

The little boy stretched out his phantom arms. Hearthstone leaned down to embrace him, and the ghost burst into white vapor.

The othala runestone fell into Hearth's palm. Hearth studied it for a moment, as if it were something he'd never seen before—a dropped jewel that the owner would surely want back. He curled his fingers around the stone and pressed it to his forehead. For once, it was my turn to read *his* lips. I was pretty sure he whispered, *Thank you.*

Something rattled in the dragon's chest. I was afraid Alderman had started to breathe again, but then I realized it was Jack quivering angrily, trying to get free.

“STUCK!” he shouted in a muffled voice. “GEMMEOUTTAEEER!”

Careful of my bare feet, I stepped toward the acidic cesspool. Blood still oozed from the dragon's chest, forming a steamy, muddy lake. There was no way I could get close enough to grab the hilt. “Jack, I can't reach you! Can't you pull yourself out?”

“PULLMYWHATNO!” he yelled. “JUSTSAIDI'MSTUCK!”

I frowned at Blitz. “How can we get him out of there?”

Blitz cupped his hands and shouted to Jack as if he were on the other side of the Grand Canyon. “Jack, you’ll just have to wait! The dragon’s blood will lose its potency in about an hour. Then we can pull you free!”

“ANHOURAREYOUKIDDINGME?” His hilt vibrated, but he remained firmly embedded in Alderman’s rib cage.

“He’ll be fine,” Blitz assured me.

Easy for him to say. He didn’t have to live with the sword.

Blitz touched Hearth’s shoulder for attention. *Need to check cave for the whetstone*, he signed. *You up for that?*

Hearth clutched the othala rune tightly. He studied the dragon’s face as if trying to see anything familiar there. Then he slipped the rune into his bag, making his set complete.

*You two go ahead, he signed. I need a minute.*

Blitz grimaced. “Yeah, buddy, no problem. You’ve got a big decision to make.”

“What decision?” I asked.

Blitz gave me a look like *Poor naïve kid*. “Come on, Magnus—let’s check out this monster’s treasure.”

The treasure was easy to find. It took up most of the cave. In the middle of the hoard was a dragon-shaped impression where Alderman used to sleep. No wonder he’d been so cranky. That mound of coins, swords, and jewel-encrusted goblets couldn’t have afforded much back support.

I walked around the edges of the hoard, pinching my nose shut to block out the overwhelming stench. My mouth still tasted like a biology class terrarium.

“Where’s the stone?” I asked. “I don’t see any of Alderman’s old artifacts.”

Blitz scratched his beard. “Well, dragons are vain. He probably wouldn’t put his dull geology specimens on top. He’d bury those and show off the shiny stuff. I wonder....”

He crouched next to the treasure. “Ha! Just as I figured. Look.”

Sticking out from the landslide of gold was the end of a braided cord.

It took me a second to recognize it. “Is that...the magic bag we got from Andvari?”

"Yep!" Blitz grinned. "The hoard is sitting right on top of it. Alderman might have been greedy, cruel, and horrible, but he wasn't stupid. He wanted his treasure to be easy to transport in case he had to find a new lair."

It seemed to me that this also made the treasure really easy to steal, but I wasn't going to argue with the logic of a dead dragon.

Blitz pulled the cord. A canvas tsunami engulfed the treasure, shuddering and shrinking until lying on the floor at our feet was a simple tote bag, suitable for grocery shopping or concealing several billion dollars' worth of priceless objects. Blitz lifted the bag with just two fingers.

Against the back wall of the cave, underneath where the treasure had been piled, lay dozens of Alderman's artifacts. Many had been crushed by the weight of the gold. Fortunately for us, rocks were pretty durable. I picked up the round gray whetstone I'd seen in my dream. Holding it did not fill me with ecstasy. Angels did not sing. I did not feel all-powerful, like I could defeat the mysterious invincible guardians of Kvasir's Mead.

"Why this?" I asked. "Why is it worth...?" I couldn't put into words the sacrifices we'd made. Especially Hearthstone.

Blitzen took off his pith helmet. He ran his fingers through his sticky hair. Despite the cave's smell of death and decay, he looked relieved to be out of the sun.

"I don't know, kid," he said. "I can only assume we'll need the stone to sharpen some blades."

I looked around at Alderman's other artifacts. "Anything else we should take while we're here? Because I *really* don't want to come back."

"Hope not, because I'm in *complete* agreement." With obvious reluctance, he put his helmet back on. "Let's go. I don't want to leave Hearthstone alone too long."

As it turned out, Hearth was not alone.

Somehow, he had freed Jack from the dragon's chest. Now the sword, being a contrary weapon, was diving right back into the dragon's carcass, wrenching the chest apart through a chink like he was performing an autopsy. Hearth seemed to be directing him.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" I said. "What are you guys doing?"

"Oh, hey, señor!" Jack floated over. He sounded cheerful for a gore-covered blade. "The elf asked me to open the rib cage. At least I'm pretty

sure that's what he was asking. I figured since he used his magic to pull me free, it was the least I could do! Oh, and I already chopped off the ring. It's right there, ready to go!"

I looked down. Sure enough, a few inches from my bare foot, Andvari's ring glittered on the swollen severed toe of the dragon. I swallowed down a surge of bile. "Ready to go? What are we doing with it?"

Hearth signed, *Put it with the treasure. Take it back to river and return it to Andvari.*

Blitz scooped up the dragon toe and dropped it in his magical tote. "We'd best do this quick, kid, before the ring starts tempting us to use it."

"Okay, but..." I pointed to the partially dissected dragon. I'd never been a hunter, but one time my mom dated a guy who hunted. He'd taken us into the woods and tried to impress my mom by teaching me how to gut a carcass. (That hadn't gone so well. Neither had their relationship.)

Anyway, looking at the dragon, I was sure Jack was trying to cut out Mr. Alderman's no-longer-vital organs.

"Why?" I managed.

Jack laughed. "Oh, come on, señor, I thought you knew! After killing a ring dragon, you have to cut out its heart, roast it, and eat it!"

That's when I lost my lunch.

## Don't Ever Ask Me to Cook My Enemy's Heart

SO FAR on our quest, I'd done well not puking. I was on my way to being a not-puking professional.

But the idea of eating a dragon's heart—*Alderman's* disgusting evil excuse for a heart—nope. That was too much.

I staggered into the woods and retched for so long I almost passed out. At last, Blitz clamped his hand on my shoulder and steered me away from the clearing. “Okay, kid. I know. Come on.”

By the time I was somewhat coherent again, I realized Blitzen was leading me toward the river where we'd met Andvari. I didn't trust myself to speak, except for the occasional “Ow!” when I stepped barefoot on a rock or a branch or a nest of Alfheim fire ants.

Finally, we reached the water. Standing at the edge of a little waterfall, I peered down into Andvari's pool. It hadn't changed much since last time. It was impossible to tell if the slimy old dwarf still lived down there, disguised as a slimy old fish. Maybe after we robbed him, he'd given up, moved to Key West, and retired. If so, I was tempted to join him.

“You ready?” Blitz's voice was strained. “I'm going to need your help.”

I squinted at him through the yellow film in my eyes. Blitz held the tote bag over the edge, ready to drop it into the pool, but his arm trembled. He yanked the bag back, as if to save the treasure from its fate, then extended his arm again with difficulty, like he was bench-pressing the entire weight of the gold.

“Going—to—fight—me,” Blitz grumbled. “Dwarves—throwing away—treasure. Not—easy.”

Somehow I managed to get my head out of *eat-dragon-heart?-what-the-Helheim?* mode. I grabbed the bag's other strap. Immediately I felt what Blitz was talking about. My mind was flooded with glorious ideas about what I could do with all this treasure—buy a mansion! (But wait...I already had Uncle Randolph's mansion, and I didn't even want it.) Get a yacht! (I already had a big yellow boat. No thanks.) Save for retirement! (I was dead.) Send my kids to college! (Einherjar can't have kids. We're dead.)

The bag shuddered and kicked. It seemed to be rethinking its strategy. *Okay, it whispered in my thoughts, how about helping the homeless? Think of all the good you could do with the gold, and this bagful is just the down payment! Put on that lovely ring, and you'll get infinite wealth! You could build housing! Provide meals! Job-training!*

These possibilities were more tempting....But I knew it was a trick. This treasure would never do anyone any good. I looked down at my bare legs, scraped and muddy. I remembered the suffocating smell of dragon belly. I recalled Hearthstone's miserable expression as he said good-bye to his father.

I muttered, "Stupid treasure."

"Yeah," said Blitz. "On three? One, two—"

We tossed the bag into the pool. I resisted the urge to jump in after it.

"There you go, Andvari," I said. "Enjoy."

Or maybe Andvari was gone. In which case, we'd just made a family of trout billionaires.

Blitz sighed with relief. "Okay, that's one burden gone. Now...the other thing."

My stomach rebelled all over again. "I'm not really supposed to—?"

"Eat the dragon's heart? You?" Blitz shook his head. "Well, you *are* the one who killed him....But in this case, no. You don't eat the heart."

"Thank the gods."

"Hearth has to do that."

"What?"

Blitz's shoulders slumped. "The dragon was Hearth's kin, Magnus. When you kill a ring dragon, you can put its spirit to rest by destroying its heart. You can either burn it up—"

"Yeah, let's do that."

"—or you can consume it, in which case you inherit all the dragon's memories and wisdom."

I tried to imagine why Hearthstone would *want* any of his father's memories or so-called wisdom. For that matter, why would he even feel obliged to put Alderman's evil spirit to rest? Andiron had told him not to waste a minute longer worrying about dead old Dad, and that sounded like excellent brotherly advice.

"But if Hearth...I mean, isn't that cannibalism, or dragonbalism or something?"

"I can't answer that." Blitz sounded like he badly wanted to answer that with a loud *YES, I KNOW IT'S DISGUSTING*. "Let's go help him with... whatever he decides."

Jack and Hearthstone had built a campfire. Hearthstone turned a spit over the flames while Jack floated next to him singing "Roll Out the Barrel" at the top of his nonexistent lungs. Being deaf, Hearthstone was the ideal audience.

The scene would have been charming except for the six-ton dragon carcass rotting nearby, the sickly expression on Hearthstone's pale face, and the basketball-size black glistening thing sizzling on the spit, filling the air with the smell of barbecue. The fact that Alderman's heart actually smelled like food made me even sicker.

Hearthstone signaled with his free hand. *Done?*

*Yeah*, Blitzen signed back. *Treasure and ring gone. Very wealthy fish.*

Hearthstone nodded, apparently satisfied. His blond hair was speckled with mud and leaves, which reminded me, ridiculously, of parade confetti, like the forest was throwing him a grim celebration for his father's death.

"Hearth, man..." I pointed at the heart. "You don't have to do this. There's got to be another way."

"That's what I told him!" Jack said. "Of course, he can't hear me, but still!"

Hearth started to sign with one hand, which is like trying to talk without vowels. He gave up in frustration. He pointed to me, then to the spit: *Take this for me.*

I didn't want to get anywhere close to that dragon heart, but I was the only one who could talk and turn the spit at the same time. Hearth could at least read my lips. Blitzen could sign, but his face was covered with netting. And Jack...well, he just wasn't very helpful.

I took over organ-roasting duty. The heart seemed much too heavy and wobbly for the spit, which was placed across two makeshift tree-branch stakes. Keeping it balanced over the flames took a lot of concentration.

Hearthstone flexed his fingers, warming up for a long conversation. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down as if his throat was already protesting tonight's dinner special.

*If I eat the heart, Hearthstone signed, it means Father's knowledge not lost forever.*

"Yeah," I said, "but why would you want that?"

His fingers hesitated in the air. *Memories of Mother, Andiron. Older family knowledge. Knowing my...*

He made an *H* with two fingers extended, then whacked the back of his opposite hand. I guessed it was the sign for *history*, though it looked a lot like a teacher slapping a bad student with a ruler.

"But you'd know things only from your father's perspective," I said. "He was *poison*. Like Andiron told you, you don't owe your father anything. He's got no wisdom to give."

Jack laughed. "Right? Dude collected rocks, after all!"

I decided it was just as well Hearth and my sword couldn't communicate.

Hearth's mouth tightened. He understood *me* just fine, but I could tell I wasn't saying anything he didn't already know. He didn't want to eat that disgusting thing. But he felt...I didn't know the right word in English or sign language. *Obliged? Honor-bound?* Maybe Hearth hoped against hope that if he knew his father's inner thoughts, he would find some glimmer of love in there, something that could redeem his memory.

I knew better. I wasn't about digging up the painful past. Look behind somebody's horrible exterior, and you usually found a horrible interior, shaped by a horrible history. I didn't want Alderman's thoughts affecting Hearthstone, literally being ingested by him. There had to be a vegetarian option. Or a Buddhist one. I would even have settled for a green-hair-friendly meal.

Blitzen sat down, crossing his legs at the ankles. He patted his friend's knee. *Your choice. But the soul will still rest if you make the other choice.*

"Yes!" I asked. "Destroy the heart. Just let it go—"

That's when I messed up. I got too excited. I was focusing on Hearth and not paying attention to my job as chef. I turned the spit a little too

forcefully. The heart wobbled. The braces collapsed inward, and the whole thing toppled into the fire.

Oh, but wait. It gets worse. With my lightning-fast and incredibly stupid einherji reflexes, I grabbed for the heart. I almost caught it in one hand, but it rolled off my fingertips and crashed into the flames, combusting like its ventricles were filled with gasoline. In a red flash, the heart was gone.

Oh, but wait. It gets worse still. The sizzling heart left boiling grease on my fingertips. And dumb Magnus, incredibly gross Magnus—I did what most people do when they touch something hot. I instinctively put my fingers to my mouth.

The taste was like ghost chili mixed with concentrated Hawaiian Punch syrup. I pulled my fingertips out and tried to spit away the blood. I retched and wiped my tongue. I crawled around sputtering, “No! *Pfftss.* No! *Pfftss.* No!”

But it was too late. Even that little taste of dragon heart’s blood had infiltrated my system. I could feel it seeping into my tongue, humming through my capillaries.

“Señor!” Jack flew toward me, his runes glowing orange. “You shouldn’t have done that!”

I bit back an insult about my sword’s godlike powers of hindsight.

Blitzen’s face was obscured by netting, but his posture was even stiffer than the time he’d been petrified. “Kid! Ah, gods, you feel okay? Dragon blood can...well, it can bring out some strange stuff in your DNA. Humans have DNA, don’t they?”

I wished we didn’t. I gripped my gut, worried that I might already be turning into a dragon. Or worse, an evil elf father.

I forced myself to meet Hearthstone’s eyes. “Hearth, I—I’m so sorry. It was an accident, I swear. I didn’t mean to...”

My voice faltered. I wasn’t sure I believed me. I didn’t know why Hearth would. I’d suggested destroying the heart. Then I’d done it. Worse, I’d tasted it.

Hearth’s face was a mask of shock.

“Tell me what to do,” I pleaded. “I’ll find some way to make it right—”

Hearthstone held up his hand. I’d seen the wall of ice he put up on those rare occasions when he was truly furious, but I saw none of that now. Instead, his muscles seemed to be unknotting, his tension draining away. He looked...relieved.

*It is wyrd, Hearth signed. You killed the dragon. Fate decided that you would taste his blood.*

“But...” I stopped myself from making another apology. Hearth’s expression made it clear he didn’t want that.

*You put my father’s soul to rest, Hearth signed. You saved me from that deed. It may cost you, though. It is I who am sorry.*

I was relieved he wasn’t angry with me. Then again, I didn’t like the new wariness in his gaze, as if he was waiting to see how the dragon blood would affect me.

Then, somewhere above, a chittering voice said, *What a knucklehead.* I flinched.

“You okay, señor?” asked Jack.

I scanned the canopy of trees. I saw no one.

Another tiny voice said, *He doesn’t even know what he’s done, does he?* *Not a clue,* the first voice agreed.

I spotted the source of the voices. On a branch about twenty feet up, two robins were eyeing me. They spoke in a series of chirps, as birds do, but somehow their meaning was clear to me.

*Ah, eggshells,* the first robin cursed. *He sees us. Fly! Fly!*

The two birds darted away.

“Kid?” Blitz asked.

My heart raced. What was happening to me? Was I hallucinating?

“I—I—yes.” I gulped. “Yeah. I’m okay. I guess.”

Hearthstone studied me, clearly unconvinced, but he decided not to argue. He rose to his feet, then glanced one last time at the corpse of his dragon father.

*We’ve lingered too long,* he signed. *Should take the whetstone back to the ship. It may already be too late to stop Loki.*



## We Almost Become a Norwegian Tourist Attraction

JUMPING OFF a cliff was the *least* strange thing I did in Alfheim.

Blitz, Hearth, and I hiked to an outcropping of rock at the edge of the Alderman property—the sort of place where a megalomaniac businessman could stand, survey the neighbors' estates in the valley below, and think *Someday, all this will be mine! BWAHAHA!*

We were just high enough to break our legs if we fell, so Hearth declared the spot perfect. He cast *raidho*, Þ, the rune of traveling, as we jumped. The air rippled around us, and instead of smashing into the ground below, we landed in a heap on the deck of the *Big Banana*, right on top of Halfborn Gunderson.

“*Eldhusfifl!*” Halfborn roared.

(That was another of his favorite insults. As he explained it, an *eldhusfifl* was a fool who sat by the communal fire all day, so basically, a village idiot. Plus, it just sounded insulting: *el-doos-feef-full*.)

We climbed off him and apologized. Then I healed his broken arm, which was still in a sling and had been re-broken by the weight of a falling dwarven butt.

“Hmph,” he said. “I suppose I forgive you, but I just washed my hair. You ruined my ‘do!”

His hair looked no different than usual, so I couldn’t tell if he was joking. He didn’t kill us with his battle-ax, though, so I guess he wasn’t too upset.

Night had fallen in Midgard. Our ship sailed the open sea under a net of stars. Blitz stripped off his overcoat, gloves, and pith helmet and took in a lungful of air. “Finally!”

The first person to emerge from belowdecks was Alex Fierro, dressed like a 1950s greaser—her green-black hair slicked back, her white T-shirt tucked into lime-colored jeans.

“Thank the gods!” She rushed toward me, which lifted my spirits for about a microsecond until she plucked the pink Buddy Holly glasses off my face. “My outfit wasn’t complete without these. I hope you didn’t scratch them.”

While she polished her specs, Mallory, T.J., and Samirah clambered up to the deck.

“Whoa!” Sam averted her eyes. “Magnus, where are your pants?”

“Um, long story.”

“Well, put on some clothes, Beantown!” Mallory ordered. “*Then* tell us the story.”

I went below to get pants and shoes. When I came back, the crew was gathered around Hearth and Blitz, who were recounting our adventure in the magical land of elves, light, and reeking dragon carcasses.

Sam shook her head. “Oh, Hearthstone. I am so sorry about your dad.”

The others murmured in agreement.

Hearth shrugged. *It had to be done. Magnus bore the worst of it. Tasting the heart.*

I winced. “Yeah, about that...I should probably tell you guys something.”

I explained about the conversation I’d overheard between the two robins.

Alex Fierro snorted, then covered her mouth. “I’m sorry. It’s not funny.” She signed: *Hearth, your father, the heart. Awful. I can’t imagine.* She continued aloud: “In fact, I have something for you.”

From her pocket, she pulled a diaphanous silk scarf of pink and green. “I noticed you lost your other one.”

Hearth took the scarf like it was a holy relic. He solemnly wrapped it around his collar. *Thank you,* he signed. *Love.*

“You bet.” Alex faced me, her mouth curling in a mischievous smile. “But honestly, Magnus. You fumbled the heart. You tasted the blood. And now you’re talking to the animals—”

“I didn’t talk,” I protested. “I only listened.”

“—like Dr. Dolittle?”

T.J. frowned. “Who is Dr. Dolittle? Does he live in Valhalla?”

“He’s a character from a book.” Samirah bit a chunk off her cucumber sandwich. Since it was nighttime, she was doing her best to eat all the ship’s food rations as fast as possible. “Magnus, any *other* effects you’ve noticed from the heart’s blood? I’m worried about you.”

“I—I don’t think so.”

“The effects might only be temporary,” T.J. suggested. “Do you still feel weird?”

“Weirder than usual?” Alex clarified.

“No,” I said. “But it’s hard to be sure. There aren’t any animals around to listen to.”

“I could turn into a ferret,” Alex offered, “and we could have a conversation.”

“Thanks anyway.”

Mallory Keen had been trying out our new whetstone on one of her knives. Now she flung the newly sharpened blade against the deck. The knife sank up to its hilt in the solid wood. “Well, well.”

“Try not to destroy our boat, woman,” Halfborn said. “We’re still sailing in it.”

She made a face at him. “This is quite a good sharpener the boys brought back.”

T.J. coughed. “Yeah, could I see that for my bayonet?”

“No, indeed.” Mallory slipped the stone in the pocket of her jacket. “I don’t trust you lot with this little beauty. I think I’ll hold on to it so you all don’t hurt yourselves. As for the dragon blood, Magnus, I wouldn’t worry. You *are* a son of Frey, one of the most powerful nature gods. Perhaps the dragon’s blood simply enhanced your natural abilities. Makes sense for you to understand forest creatures.”

“Huh.” I nodded, slightly encouraged. “Maybe you’re right. Still, I’d feel bad if I took away part of Hearthstone’s heritage. I mean, what if Mr. Alderman could understand animals—?”

Hearth shook his head. *Father was not Doctor Dolittle. Do not feel guilty. I have the othala rune back. That is enough for me.*

He looked exhausted but relieved, like he’d just finished a six-hour test he’d been dreading all semester. He might not be sure he passed, but at least the ordeal was over.

“Well,” said Samirah, “we have the whetstone. Now we have to get to Fläm, find Kvasir’s Mead, and figure out how to defeat its guardians.”

“Then feed the mead to Magnus,” Alex said, “hoping it gives him the gift of speaking in complete sentences.”

Mallory frowned as if she found this unlikely. “Then we find the Ship of the Dead and pray Magnus can beat Loki in a flyingt.”

“Then somehow recapture that meinfretr,” Halfborn said, “stop *Naglfar* from launching, and prevent Ragnarok. Assuming, of course, we’re not too late already.”

That seemed like a big assumption. We’d burned two more days in Alfheim. Midsummer was roughly ten days away now, and I was pretty sure Loki’s ship would be able to sail well before that.

Also, my mind stuck on Mallory’s words: *pray Magnus can beat Loki in a flyingt*. I didn’t have Sam’s faith in prayer, especially when it was a prayer about me.

Blitz sighed. “I’m going to wash up. I smell like a troll. Then I’m going to sleep for a very long time.”

“Good idea,” Halfborn said. “Magnus and Hearth, you should, too.”

I could get behind that plan. Jack had returned to runestone form on my neck chain, which meant my arms and shoulders now ached like I’d spent the day sawing through dragon hide. My skin itched all over, as if my anti-acid finish had been sorely tested.

T.J. rubbed his hands with excitement. “Tomorrow morning, we should enter the fjords of Norway. I can’t wait to see what we get to kill there!”

\* \* \*

I slept without dreams, which was a nice change, until eventually Samirah shook me awake. She was grinning way too much for someone on a fast. “You really should see this.”

I struggled out of my sleeping bag. When I got to my feet and looked over the railing, I lost the ability to breathe.

On either side of the ship, so close I could almost touch them, sheer cliffs rose out of the water—thousand-foot-high walls of rock marbled with waterfalls. White rivulets of snowmelt coursed down the ridges, bursting into mist that fractured the sunlight into rainbows. The sky had been reduced to a jagged ravine of deep blue directly above. Around the hull, the water was so green it might have been algae puree.

In the shadow of those cliffs, I felt so small I could only think of one place we might be. “Jotunheim?”

T.J. laughed. “No, it’s just Norway. Pretty, huh?”

Pretty didn’t do it justice. I felt like we’d sailed into a world meant for much larger beings, a place where gods and monsters roamed freely. Of course, I knew gods and monsters roamed freely all over Midgard. Heimdall was fond of a certain bagel place near Fenway. Giants often strolled through the marshes in Longview. But Norway seemed like a proper stomping ground for them.

I got a little ache in my heart, thinking how much my mom would’ve loved this place. I wished I could share it with her. I could picture her hiking along those cliff-tops, relishing the sun and the crisp, clean air.

At the prow stood Alex and Mallory, both silent in amazement. Hearth and Blitz must have still been asleep below. Halfborn sat at the rudder, a sour look on his face.

“What’s wrong?” I asked him.

The berserker eyed the cliffs as if they might collapse on us if he made a bad comment. “Nah. It’s beautiful. Hasn’t really changed since I was a boy.”

“Fläm was your hometown?” I guessed.

He let out a bitter laugh. “Well, wasn’t much of a town. And it wasn’t called Fläm back then. Just a nameless fishing village at the end of the fjord. You’ll see the spot in a minute.”

His knuckles whitened on the rudder. “As a boy, I couldn’t get out of here fast enough. Joined Ivar the Boneless when I was twelve and went a-Viking. I told my mom...” He grew silent. “I told her I wouldn’t come back until the skalds were singing about my heroic deeds. I never saw her again.”

The boat glided onward, the soft applause of the waterfalls echoing through the fjord. I remembered what Halfborn had told me about not liking to go backward, not revisiting his past. I wondered if he felt guilty about leaving his mom, or disappointed that the skalds hadn’t made him a great hero. Or maybe they *had* sung about his deeds. From what I’d seen, fame rarely lasted longer than a few years, much less centuries. Some einherjar in Valhalla got bitter when they realized nobody born after the Middle Ages had a clue as to who they were.

“You’re famous to us,” I offered.

Halfborn grunted.

“I could ask Jack to write a song about you.”

“Gods forbid!” His brow remained furrowed, but his mustache quirked like he was trying not to smile. “Enough of that. We’ll be docking soon. Keen, Fierro, stop gawking at the scenery and help! Trim the sail! Ready the mooring lines!”

“We’re not your pirate wenches, Gunderson,” Mallory grumbled, but she and Alex did as he asked.

We rounded a curve, and again I caught my breath. At the end of the fjord, a narrow valley split the mountains—layer upon layer of green hills and forests zigzagging into the distance like an infinite reflection. At the rocky shore, shadowed by cliffs, a few dozen red, ochre, and blue houses clustered together as if for protection. Parked at the dock was a giant white cruise ship bigger than the entire town—a twenty-story floating hotel.

“Well, *that* wasn’t here before,” Halfborn grumbled.

“Tourists,” Mallory said. “What do you think, T.J.? Are they exciting enough for you to fight?”

T.J. tilted his head as if considering the idea.

I decided it might be a good time to refocus the conversation.

“So, back in York,” I said, “Hrungnir told us to take the train in Fläm, then we’d find what we were looking for. Anybody see a train?”

T.J. frowned. “How could anybody lay tracks across terrain like that?”

It did seem improbable. Then I glanced off our port side. A car zipped along the base of a cliff. It made a hairpin turn and disappeared into a tunnel, straight through the side of the mountain. If Norwegians were crazy enough to build and drive on highways like that, maybe they were crazy enough to lay train tracks the same way.

“Let’s go ashore and find out,” Alex suggested. “I recommend we dock as far as possible from that cruise ship.”

“You don’t like tourists?” Sam asked.

“That’s not it,” said Alex. “I’m afraid they’ll notice this bright yellow Viking boat and think we’re a local attraction. You want to give rides around the fjord all day?”

Sam shuddered. “Good point.”

We slipped into the dock farthest from the cruise ship. Our only neighbors were a couple of fishing boats and a Jet Ski with the dubious name *Odin II* painted on the side. I considered one *Odin* quite enough. I wasn’t anxious for a sequel.

As Mallory and Alex tied the mooring lines, I scanned the town of Fläm. It was small, yes, but more convoluted than it had appeared from a distance. Streets wound up and down hills, through pockets of houses and shops, stretching out about half a mile along the shore of the fjord. I would have thought a train station would be easy to spot, but I didn't see one from the dock.

"We could split up," Mallory suggested. "Cover more ground that way." I frowned. "That never works in horror movies."

"Then you come with me, Magnus," Mallory said. "I'll keep you safe." She frowned at Halfborn Gunderson. "But I refuse to be stuck with *this* lout again. Samirah, you're useful in a pinch. How about it?"

The invitation seemed to surprise Sam, although Mallory had been treating her with a lot more deference since the incident with the water horses. "Uh, sure."

Halfborn scowled. "Fine by me! I'll take Alex and T.J."

Mallory arched her eyebrows. "You're going ashore? I thought you wouldn't set foot—"

"Well, you thought wrong!" He blinked twice, as if he'd surprised himself. "This isn't my home anymore, just a random tourist stop! What does it matter?"

He sounded less than certain. I wondered if it would be helpful to offer to switch up the teams. Mallory had a gift for distracting Halfborn. I would've been willing to trade her for...I don't know, Alex, maybe. But I didn't think the offer would be appreciated by anybody else.

"What about Hearthstone and Blitz?" I said. "Shouldn't I wake them up?"

"Good luck with that," Alex said. "They are *out*."

"Could you fold up the ship with them inside?" T.J. asked.

"Doesn't sound safe," I said. "They could wake up and find themselves stuck in a handkerchief."

"Ah, leave 'em here," Halfborn said. "They'll be fine. This place was never dangerous, unless it bored you to death."

"I'll leave them a note," Sam volunteered. "How about we scout around for half an hour? We'll meet back here. Then, assuming somebody's found the train, we can all go there together."

We agreed that plan had a low possibility of violent death. A few minutes later, Halfborn, T.J., and Alex headed off in one direction, while

Mallory, Sam, and I headed the other way—wandering the streets of Fläm to find a train and some interesting enemies to kill.

## Fläm, Bomb, Thank You, Mom

AN OLD LADY was not what I had in mind.

We walked about three blocks through crowds of tourists, past shops selling chocolate and moose sausage and little wooden troll souvenirs. (You would think anybody descended from Vikings would know better than to create *more* trolls.) As we passed a small grocery store, Mallory grabbed my arm with enough force to leave a bruise.

“It’s *her*.” She spat the word like a mouthful of poison.

“Who?” Sam asked. “Where?”

Mallory pointed to a store called Knit Pickers, where tourists were oohing and aahing over a sidewalk display of locally produced wool yarn. (Norway offered something for everyone.)

“The lady in white,” Mallory said.

I spotted the one she meant. In the midst of the crowd stood an old woman with rounded shoulders and a hunched back. Her head craned forward like it was trying to get away from her body. Her white knit sweater was so fuzzy it might have been cotton candy, and cocked on her head was a matching floppy hat that made it hard to see her face. Dangling from one arm was a bag stuffed with yarn and knitting needles.

I didn’t understand what had attracted Mallory’s attention. I could easily have picked out ten other folks from the cruise ship who looked stranger. Then the old lady glanced in our direction. Her cloudy white eyes seemed to pierce right through me as if she’d ninja-chucked her knitting needles into my chest.

The crowd of tourists shifted, engulfing her, and the feeling passed.

I gulped. “Who was—?”

“Come on!” Mallory said. “We can’t lose her!”

She dashed toward the knitting store. Samirah and I exchanged a worried look, then followed.

A senior citizen dressed in cotton candy shouldn’t have been able to hobble very fast, but the lady was already two blocks away when we got to Knit Pickers. We ran after her, dodging tour groups, bicyclists, and guys carrying kayaks. Mallory didn’t wait for us. By the time Sam and I caught up, she was clinging to a chain-link fence outside a small train depot, cursing as she scanned for her lost prey.

“You found the train,” I noted.

Parked at the platform were half a dozen brightly painted old-fashioned railcars. Tourists were piling on board. The tracks wound away from the station and up the hills into the ravine beyond.

“Where is she?” Mallory muttered.

“Who is she?” asked Sam.

“There!” Mallory pointed to the last car, where the cotton candy grandma was just getting on board.

“We need tickets,” Mallory barked. “Quickly.”

“We should get the others,” Sam said. “We told them we’d rendezvous  
—”

“NO TIME!”

Mallory nearly mugged Sam for her Norwegian kroner. (Currency provided, of course, by the ever-resourceful Alex.) With much cursing and hand-waving, Mallory managed to purchase three tickets from the station attendant, then we bolted through the turnstile and made it aboard the last car just as the doors were closing.

The cabin was hot, stuffy, and packed with tourists. As the train rattled up the hillside, I felt queasier than I had since...well, the day before, roasting that dragon heart in Alfheim. It didn’t help that I would occasionally catch snippets of bird chatter from outside—conversations I could still understand, mostly about where one could find the juiciest worms and bugs.

“Okay, Mallory, explain,” Sam demanded. “Why are we following this old lady?”

Mallory slowly made her way up the aisle, checking the faces of the passengers. “She’s the woman who got me killed. She’s Loki.”

Sam almost fell into an old man’s lap. “What?”

Mallory gave her the quick version of what she'd told me a few days ago: how she'd set a car bomb, then regretted it, then gotten a visit from an old woman who convinced her to go back and disarm the bomb using a couple of super-useful daggers that turned out to be super-useless. And then *ka-boom*.

"But *Loki*?" Sam asked. "Are you sure?"

I understood the anxiety in Sam's voice. She'd been training to fight her dad, but she hadn't expected it to happen here, today. Fighting *Loki* was *not* a class in which you wanted a pop quiz.

"Who else could it be?" Mallory scowled. "She's not here. Let's try the next car."

"And if we catch him?" I asked. "Or her?"

Mallory unsheathed one of her knives. "I told you. That lady got me killed. I intend to return her daggers, points-first."

In the next car, tourists pressed against the windows, taking pictures of ravines, waterfalls, and quaint villages. Squares of farmland quilted the valley floor. Mountains cast shadows as sharp as sundial needles. Every time the train rounded a bend, the view seemed more scenic than before.

Samirah and I kept stopping, dumbfounded by the scenery outside, but Mallory had no interest in pretty stuff. The old lady wasn't in the second car, so we moved on.

In the next car, halfway up the aisle, Mallory froze. The last two rows on the right were arranged in a sort of conversation nook, with three backward-facing seats and three that faced forward. The rest of the cabin was jammed with people, but that little nook was empty except for the old lady. She sat facing our direction, humming as she knit, paying no attention to the scenery or to us.

A low growl started in Mallory's throat.

"Hold on." Sam grabbed her wrist. "There are a lot of mortals on this train. Can we at least *confirm* that this lady is *Loki* before we start killing and destroying?"

If *I* had tried to make that argument, I imagined Mallory would've hilt-bashed me in the groin. Since it was Sam asking, Mallory sheathed her dagger.

"Fine," she snapped. "We'll try to talk to her first. *Then* I'll kill her. Happy?"

"Delirious," Sam said.

That didn't describe my mood. Jumpy and confuzzled came closer. But I followed the girls as they approached the old lady in white.

Without looking up from her knitting, she said, "Hello, my dears! Please, sit."

Her voice surprised me. It sounded young and beautiful, like a radio announcer on a wartime propaganda station trying to convince enemy soldiers she was on their side. Norway Nancy, maybe. Or Fläm Flo.

Her face was hard to see—and not just because of the floppy hat. Her features glowed with a white light as fuzzy as her sweater. She seemed to be every age at once: a little girl, a teenager, a young lady, an old grandmother, all the faces existing in the present like the layers of a transparent onion. Maybe she hadn't been able to decide which glamour to wear today, so she'd just worn them all.

I glanced at my friends. We took a silent vote.

*Sit?* I asked.

*Kill?* Mallory asked.

*Sit,* Sam ordered.

We edged into the three seats across from the old lady. I kept one eye on her knitting needles, waiting for her to bust out some dual-wielding moves, but she just kept working on her fuzzy white yarn, making what looked like a cotton candy scarf.

"Well?" Mallory snapped. "What do you want?"

The old lady clucked disapprovingly. "My dear, is that any way to treat me?"

"I should treat you worse, Loki," Mallory growled. "You got me killed!"

"Mallory," Sam said. "This isn't Loki."

The relief was obvious in her voice. I wasn't sure how Sam knew, but I hoped she was right. There wasn't room in this train car to wield a blazing spear of light or a singing broadsword.

Mallory's face mottled red. "What do you mean *not* Loki?"

"Mallory Audrey Keen," the old woman chided. "Did you really think, for all these years, I was *Loki*? For shame. Few beings in the Nine Worlds hate Loki as much as I do."

I considered that good news, but when I met Sam's eyes I could tell she had the same question I did: *Audrey?*

Mallory shifted, her hands on the hilts of her daggers like she was a downhill skier approaching a difficult jump. “You were there in Belfast,” she insisted. “In 1972. You gave me these useless knives, said I should run back and disarm the bomb on that school bus.”

Sam caught her breath. “School bus? You targeted a *school bus*?”

Mallory did her best to avoid our eyes. Her face was the color of cherry juice.

“Don’t be too hard on her,” said the old lady. “She was told the bus would be full of soldiers, not children. It was July twenty-first. The Irish Republican Army was planting bombs all across Belfast against the British—retaliation for retaliation, as it usually goes. Mallory’s friends wanted in on the action.”

“Two of my friends had been shot by the police the month before,” Mallory murmured. “They were fifteen and sixteen. I wanted revenge.” She glanced up. “But Loki was one of the lads in our gang that day. He *must* have been. I’ve heard his voice since then, taunting me in dreams. I know how his power can tug—”

“Oh, yes.” The old lady continued to knit. “And do you hear his voice right now?”

Mallory blinked. “I...I suppose not.”

The old lady smiled. “You’re correct, my dear. Loki *was* there that Friday in July, disguised as one of you, egging you on to see how much mischief he could create. You were the angriest of the bunch, Mallory—the doer, not the talker. He knew just how to manipulate you.”

Mallory stared at the floorboards. She swayed with the rattling of the train. Behind us, tourists gasped with delight every time a new vista came into view.

“Uh, ma’am?” I didn’t usually insert myself into conversations with creepy godly ladies, but I felt bad for Mallory. No matter what she’d done in her past, she seemed to be shrinking under the woman’s words. I remembered that feeling well from my most recent dream about Loki.

“If you’re not Loki,” I said, “which is great, by the way, then who are you? Mallory said you were there, too, the day she died. After she set the bomb, you appeared and told her—”

The intensity of the woman’s gaze pinned me to my seat. Within her white irises, gold pupils glowed like tiny suns.

“I told Mallory what she already suspected,” the woman said. “That the bus would be full of children, and that she had been used. I encouraged her to follow her conscience.”

“You got me killed!” Mallory said.

“I urged you to become a hero,” the woman said calmly. “And you did. Around twenty other bombs went off in Belfast on July 21, 1972. It became known as Bloody Friday. How much worse would it have been if you hadn’t acted?”

Mallory scowled. “But the knives—”

“—were my gifts to you,” said the woman, “so that you would die with blades in your hands and go to Valhalla. I suspected they would be useful to you someday, but—”

“*Someday?*” Mallory demanded. “You might have mentioned that part before I got myself blown up trying to cut bomb wires with them!”

The woman’s frown seemed to ripple outward through her layers of ages—the little girl, the young woman, the crone. “My powers of prophecy are short-range, Mallory. I can only see what will happen within twenty-four hours, give or take. That’s why I’m here. You will need those knives. *Today.*”

Sam sat forward. “You mean...to help us retrieve Kvasir’s Mead?”

The woman nodded. “You have good instincts, Samirah al-Abbas. The knives—”

“Why should we listen to you?” Mallory blurted out. “Whatever you tell us to do, it’ll probably get us killed!”

The woman laid her knitting needles across her lap. “My dear, I am the goddess of foresight and the immediate future. I would never tell you what to do. I am only here to give you the information you need to make a good choice. As to why you should listen to me, I hope you would do so because I love you.”

“*LOVE ME?*” Mallory looked at us in disbelief, like *Are you hearing this?* “Old woman, I don’t even know who you *are!*”

“Of course you do, dear.”

The woman’s form shimmered. Before us sat a middle-aged woman of regal beauty, her long hair the same color as Mallory’s, plaited down both shoulders. Her hat became a war helm of white metal, glowing and flickering like trapped neon gas. Her white dress seemed made of the same stuff, only woven into gentle folds. In her knitting bag, her fuzzy yarn had

become swirling puffs of mist. The goddess, I realized, had been knitting with clouds.

“I am Frigg,” she said, “queen of the Aesir. And I am your mother, Mallory Keen.”



THIRTY-ONE

## Mallory Gets Nuts

YOU KNOW how it goes. You're minding your own business, taking a train up a ravine in the middle of Norway, when an old lady with a bag of knitting supplies introduces herself as your godly mother.

If I had a krone for every time that happened...

When Frigg broke the news, the train screeched to a stop as if the locomotive itself were asking *SAY WHAT?*

Over the intercom, an announcement crackled in English: something about a photo opportunity with a waterfall. I didn't know why that rated a stop, since we'd already passed about a hundred scenic waterfalls, but all the tourists got up and piled out of the car until we were alone: just Sam, Mallory, me, and the Queen of the Universe.

Mallory had been frozen for a good twenty seconds. When the aisle was clear, she shot to her feet, marched to the end of the car and back again, then shouted at Frigg, "You don't just ANNOUNCE something like that out of NOWHERE!"

Yelling at a goddess isn't generally a good idea. You run the risk of getting impaled, zapped, or eaten by giant house cats. (It's a Freya thing. Don't ask.) Frigg didn't seem bothered, though. Her calmness made me question how she could be related to Mallory.

Now that Frigg's appearance had resolved into one clear image, I saw faint scars under her white-and-gold eyes, scoring her cheeks like the tracks of tears. On an otherwise divinely perfect face, the streaks were jarring, especially since they reminded me of another goddess with similar scars: Sigyn, the strange silent wife of Loki.

"Mallory," Frigg said. "Daughter—"

“Don’t call me that.”

“You already know it is true. You’ve had suspicions for years.”

Samirah gulped, as if she’d forgotten how to swallow for the past few minutes. “Wait. You are Frigg. Wife of Odin. Mrs. Odin. *The Frigg.*”

The goddess chuckled. “As far as I know, dear, I’m the only Frigg. It’s not a very popular name.”

“But...*nobody* ever sees you.” Sam patted her clothes like she was looking for an autograph pen. “I mean...*never*. I don’t know a single Valkyrie or einherji who has ever met you. And Mallory is your *daughter*? ”

Mallory threw her hands in the air. “Will you stop fangirling, Valkyrie?”

“But don’t you see—?”

“—another deadbeat parent? Yeah, I do.” Keen scowled at the goddess. “If you’re my ma, you’re no better than my da.”

“Oh, child.” Frigg’s voice turned heavy. “Your father wasn’t always as broken as when you knew him. I’m sorry you never got to see him the way I did, before the drinking and the rage.”

“Wouldn’t that have been peachy.” Mallory blinked her red-tinged eyes. “But since you apologized, I suppose all’s forgiven!”

“Mallory,” Sam chided, “how can you be so callous? This is your *mom*. Frigg is your mom!”

“Right. I heard.”

“But...” Sam shook her head. “But that’s *good!*”

“I’ll be the judge of that.” Mallory plopped back into her seat. She crossed her arms and glared at the clouds in her mother’s knitting bag.

I tried to see similarities between mother and daughter. Beyond the red hair, I couldn’t. Frigg wrapped herself in gentle white clouds. She radiated calm, cool, and melancholy. Mallory was more like a dust devil, all agitation and fury. Despite the goddess’s war helm, I couldn’t imagine Frigg dual-wielding knives any more than I could imagine Mallory sitting quietly, knitting a cloud scarf.

I understood why Mallory was angry. But I also got the wistful yearning in Samirah’s voice. Sam and I had both lost our moms. We would have given anything to have them back. *Gaining* a mom, even one who had waited fifty-odd years to reveal herself...That wasn’t something to throw away lightly.

From the left side of the train, music drifted in through the open windows. Somewhere, a woman was singing.

Frigg turned her ear toward the sound. “Ah...that’s just a mortal singer performing for the tourists. She’s pretending to be a spirit of the waterfall. She’s not a real *nøkk*.”

I shuddered. “Good.”

“Indeed,” Frigg said. “You have quite enough on your plate today with the giant’s thralls.”

Sam leaned forward. “Giant’s thralls? As in slaves?”

“I’m afraid so,” Frigg said. “The thralls of the giant Baugi guard the mead. To defeat them, you will need the stone in my daughter’s pocket.”

Mallory’s hand moved to the side of her jacket. I’d forgotten she was carrying the whetstone. Apparently, she had, too.

“I don’t like the idea of fighting slaves,” Mallory said. “I also don’t like you calling me *daughter*. You haven’t earned the right. Not yet. Maybe not ever.”

On Frigg’s cheeks, the tear scars glistened like veins of silver.

“Mallory...ever is a very long time. I’ve learned not to try seeing that far into the future. Whenever I attempt it...” She sighed. “Always tragedy, like what happened to my poor son Balder.”

*Balder*, I thought. *Which one was Balder?* Dealing with the Norse gods, I really needed a program with glossy color pictures of all the players, along with their season stats.

“He died?” I guessed.

Sam elbowed me, though I thought it was a perfectly legitimate question. “He was the most handsome of the gods,” she explained. “Frigg had a dream that he would die.”

“And so I tried to prevent it.” Frigg picked up her needles. She knitted a stitch of cloud vapor. “I exacted promises from everything in the Nine Worlds not to harm my son. Each type of stone. Each type of metal. Salt water. Freshwater. Air. Even fire. Fire was hard to convince. But there are many, many things in the Nine Worlds. Toward the end...I’ll admit, I got tired and absent-minded. I neglected one tiny plant, mistletoe. When I realized my oversight, I thought *Oh, well, it doesn’t matter. Mistletoe is much too small and insignificant to hurt Balder*. Then, of course, Loki found out—”

“I remember this part,” Mallory said, still glaring at the bag of clouds. “Loki tricked a blind god into killing Balder with a mistletoe dart. Which means Loki murdered...my brother.”

She tasted the word, trying it out. From her expression, I guessed she didn't like it. "So, Ma, do you fail all your children spectacularly? Is that a thing with you?"

Frigg frowned, and a hint of storm darkened her cloud-white irises. I wished the seats were wider so I could scoot away from Mallory.

"The death of Balder was a hard lesson," said the goddess. "I learned that even I, queen of the Aesir, have limits. If I concentrate, I can glean the destiny of any living thing. I can even manipulate their wyrd to some extent. But *only* in the short term—twenty-four hours, sometimes less. If I try to look beyond that, to shape someone's long-term fate..." She separated her needles. Her knitting unraveled into wisps of smoke.

"You may hate me, Mallory," Frigg said. "But it is too painful for me to visit my children, to see what will befall them and not be able to change it. That is why I only appear into times when I *know* I can make a difference. Today, for you, is one of those times."

Mallory seemed to be struggling internally—her anger battling her curiosity.

"All right, I'll bite," she relented. "What's my future?"

Frigg pointed out the window on our right. My vision telescopied, zooming across the valley. If I hadn't been sitting down, I would have fallen. I guessed Frigg was enhancing my sight, giving me Heimdall-level clarity for just a moment.

At the base of a mountain, a waterfall split against a granite promontory as if it were the prow of a ship. In the center of the rock, between twin white curtains of water, stood a massive set of iron doors. And spread out before those doors, on a strip of land between the two rivers, was a field of ripe wheat. Nine burly men, wearing only iron neck collars and loincloths, worked the field, swinging their scythes like a squadron of grim reapers.

My vision snapped back to normal. Looking across the valley, I could now just make out the spot where the waterfall split on the rock—maybe ten miles away.

"That is the place," Frigg said. "And there is the path you must use to reach it."

She pointed to the base of the railroad tracks. Just out the window, a streak of rubble zigzagged down the side of the cliff. Calling it a *path* was generous. I would've called it a *landslide*.

“Today, Mallory,” the goddess announced, “you will need those daggers, and your wits. You are the key to retrieving Kvasir’s Mead.”

Mallory and Sam both looked queasy. I guessed they’d also gotten a free trial of Heimdall-Vision.

“I don’t suppose you could be any vaguer?” Mallory asked.

Frigg gave her a sad smile. “You have your father’s fierce spirit, my dear. I hope you can master it and use it, as he could not. You have everything you need to retrieve the mead, but there is one last gift I can give you—something that will help you when you finally face Loki. As I learned when I underestimated mistletoe...even the smallest thing can make a vast difference.”

She reached into her knitting bag and pulled out a small wrinkled brown orb....A chestnut? Walnut? One of those big nuts. She pulled apart the two halves, showing that the shell was empty, then fit them back together. “If Magnus defeats Loki in the flying, you will have to imprison the trickster in this shell.”

“Wait, *if*?” I asked. “Can’t you see my future?”

The goddess fixed me with her strange white gaze. “The future is a brittle thing, Magnus Chase. Sometimes merely revealing someone’s destiny can cause that destiny to shatter.”

I gulped. I felt like a high-pitched tone was reverberating through my bones, ready to crack them like glass. “Okay. Let’s not shatter anything, then.”

“If you defeat Loki,” Frigg continued, “bring him back to the Aesir, and we will deal with him.”

From the tone of Frigg’s voice, I doubted the Aesir planned on throwing Loki a welcome-back party.

She threw the nut.

Mallory caught it in her fingertips. “Bit small for a god, isn’t it?”

“It won’t be if Magnus succeeds,” Frigg said. “The ship *Naglfar* has not yet sailed. You have at least twenty-four hours. Perhaps even forty-eight. After that...”

Blood roared in my ears. I didn’t see how we could do everything we needed to do in a day—or even two. I *definitely* didn’t see how I could insult Loki down to the size of a walnut.

The train’s whistle blew—a plaintive sound like a bird calling for its dead mate. (And you can trust me on that, because I understood birdcalls.)

Tourists began piling back onto the train.

“I must go,” Frigg said. “And so must you.”

“You just *got* here.” Mallory’s scowl deepened. Her expression hardened. “But fine. Whatever. Leave.”

“Oh, my dear.” Frigg’s eyes misted over, the light dimming in her golden pupils. “I am never far, even if you do not see me. We will meet again....” A new tear trickled down the scarred path of her left cheek. “Until then, trust your friends. You are right: they are more important than any magic items. And whatever happens, whether you choose to believe me or not, I love you.”

The goddess dissolved, knitting bag and all, leaving a sheen of condensation on the seat.

The tourists piled back into the train car. Mallory stared at the moist impression left by her godly mother, as if hoping the water droplets might reconstitute into something that made sense: a target, an enemy, even a bomb. A mother who showed up out of nowhere and proclaimed *I love you* —that was something no knives, no wits, no walnut shell could help her conquer.

I wondered if I could say anything to make her feel better. I doubted it. Mallory was about action, not talk.

Apparently, Sam reached the same conclusion. “We should go,” she said, “before—”

The train lurched into motion. Unfortunately, tourists were still shuffling to their seats, blocking the aisles. We’d never be able to muscle our way to the door before the train got back up to full speed and left the mountainside trail far behind.

Sam glanced at the open window on our right. “Another exit?”

“That’s suicidal,” I said.

“That’s typical,” Mallory corrected.

She led the way, leaping out the window of the moving train.



## Mallory Also Gets Fruit

DON'T GET me wrong.

If you're going to fall down the side of a mountain, Norway is a beautiful place to do it. We skidded past lovely creeks, bounced off majestic trees, fell from imposing cliffs, and tumbled through fields of fragrant wildflowers. Somewhere off to my left, Mallory Keen cursed in Gaelic. Somewhere behind me, Samirah kept yelling, "Magnus, take my hand! Magnus!"

I couldn't see her, so I couldn't comply. Nor did I understand why she wanted to hold hands as we fell to our demise.

I shot from the side of a ridge, pinballed off a spruce, and finally rolled to a stop on a more level slope, my head coming to rest against something fuzzy and warm. Through a haze of pain, I found myself staring up at the brown-and-white face of a goat.

"Otis?" I mumbled.

*Baaaaaa*, said the goat.

I could understand his meaning, not because he was Thor's talking goat Otis, but because regular goat bleats now made as much sense to me as bird chirps. He'd said *No, stupid. I'm Theodore. And my belly is not a pillow.*

"Sorry," I mumbled.

The goat got to his feet and capered off, depriving me of my comfy headrest.

I sat up, groaning. I did a self-check and found nothing broken. Amazing. Frigg really knew how to suggest the safest trails to hurtle down at life-threatening speeds.

Samirah swooped down from the sky, her green hijab rippling around her face. “Magnus, didn’t you hear me calling? You didn’t have to *fall!* I was going to *fly* you both down here.”

“Ah.” That awkward moment when you jump out a window because your friend jumped out a window, then you remember that your other friend can fly. “When you say it like that, it does make more sense. Where’s Mallory?”

“*Cailleach!*” she shouted from somewhere nearby.

I recognized the word: Gaelic for *witch* or *hag*, which I assumed Mallory was using as a term of endearment for her newly discovered maternal unit. In case you’re curious, the word is pronounced: *Ki*—followed by clearing a large amount of mucus from your throat. Try it at home, kids! It’s fun!

Finally, I spotted Mallory. She had fused herself with a blackberry bush, her head wedged firmly between its two largest boughs, its thorny branches woven into her clothes. She was hanging upside down with her left arm bent at a strange angle.

“Hold on!” I yelled, which in retrospect was dumb, since she obviously wasn’t going anywhere.

Sam and I managed to extricate her from her new fruit-bearing friend. Then I summoned the power of Frey and healed a thousand small cuts and a fractured bone, though I couldn’t do much about her wounded pride or her foul mood.

“Better?” I asked.

She spat a leaf from her mouth. “Compared to five minutes ago? Yeah. Compared to this morning, when I didn’t know that cailleach was my ma? Not so much.”

She pulled the walnut from her pocket. It had left quite a bruise against her hip during her tumble down the mountain, but the shell itself was undamaged. Mallory seemed to take this as a personal affront. She stuck the nut in her jacket along with the whetstone, muttering various insults about the walnut’s parentage.

Sam reached out to pat Mallory’s shoulder, then clearly thought better of it. “I—I know you’re angry.”

“Yeah?” Mallory snapped. “What gave it away?”

“But...*Frigg*,” Sam said, as if the name alone was an entire persuasive essay with three examples per paragraph and a conclusion. “You see the

similarities, don't you?"

Mallory flexed her healed arm. "What similarities would those be, Valkyrie? Choose your words carefully."

Sam ignored the threat. When she spoke, her voice was full of awe. "Frigg's the power behind the throne! Odin's the king, but he's always traveling. Frigg controls Asgard. She does it without anybody even noticing. You've heard the story about when Odin was exiled, right?"

Sam looked at me for support.

I had no clue what she was referring to, so I said, "Yep, absolutely."

Sam pointed at me like *See? Magnus knows what's up!*

"Odin's brothers Vili and Ve took over in his absence," she said. "But to do so, they had to marry Frigg. Different kings. Same queen. Asgard got along just fine, because Frigg was the one in charge."

Mallory frowned. "You're saying I'm like my ma because I'll hook up with anybody to get power?"

"No!" Sam blushed. "I'm saying Frigg is always below the radar, never seen, but she is the cement that holds the Aesir together."

Mallory tapped her foot. "Now you're comparing me to easily ignored cement."

"I'm saying you're like your mother because you're the Frigg of floor nineteen. T.J. and Halfborn never would have become friends if you hadn't goaded them into it. They used to hate each other."

I blinked. "They did?"

"True enough," Mallory muttered. "When I arrived—ugh. They were insufferable. I mean even *more* insufferable."

"Exactly," said Sam. "You made them a *team*. Then, when Odin disguised himself as an einherji, do you think it was an *accident* he chose to live on your floor? You're Frigg's chosen agent in Valhalla. The All-Father wanted to see what you were made of."

I hadn't thought about that for a while. When I first arrived in Valhalla, Odin had been slumming with us on floor nineteen disguised as X the half-troll. X had liked dogs, was good in battle, and never said much. I liked Odin a lot better in that form.

"Huh," Mallory grunted. "You really believe that?"

"I do," Sam said. "And when Magnus came along, where did he end up? On *your* team. Same with Alex. Same with me." Sam spread her hands. "So, excuse me if I fangirled a little when I met Frigg, but she has *always*

been my favorite Aesir. She's kind of the *anti-Loki*. She keeps things together while Loki is trying to pick them apart. And knowing you're her daughter...well, that makes perfect sense to me. I am even more honored to fight at your side."

More red splotches appeared on Mallory's face, but this time I didn't think they were from anger. "Well, Valkyrie, you've got your father's silver tongue. I don't see any reason to kill you for what you've said."

That was Mallory's way of saying *thank you*.

Sam inclined her head. "Then let's find Kvasir's Mead, shall we?"

"One more thing," I said, because I couldn't help myself. "Mallory, if your middle name is Audrey, and your initials are *M. A. K.*—"

She raised an index finger. "Don't say it, Beantown."

"We are totally calling you Mack now."

Mallory fumed. "My friends in Belfast used to call me that. *Constantly.*"

That wasn't a *no*, so I decided we had permission.

The next hour we spent trekking across the valley floor. Sam tried to text Alex to let her know we were okay, but she couldn't get a signal. No doubt the Norse god of cell-phone service had decreed *THOU SHALT HAVE NO BARS!* and was now laughing at our expense.

We walked over a creaky wooden bridge spanning white-water rapids. We navigated a pasture full of goats who were not Otis. We passed from frigid shadows into baking sunlight as we moved in and out of the woods. All the while, I did my best to tune out the voices of birds, squirrels, and goats, none of whom had anything good to say about us walking through their territory. Slowly, we made our way toward the split waterfall we'd seen from the train. Even in this colossal countryside, it was an easy landmark.

We stopped once for lunch—consisting only of some trail mix Mallory happened to have, along with a few wild blackberries we picked, and water from a stream so cold it made my teeth hurt. Sam didn't join us, of course. She just did her noon prayers on a carpet of fluffy green grass.

I'll say this about Ramadan: it cut down my impulse to whine.

Whenever I started thinking I had it rough, I remembered that Samirah was doing everything I was doing but without food or water.

We trekked up the other side of the valley, using the twin rivers from the waterfall as our guidelines. At last, as the falls loomed close, we heard

harsh rasping sounds coming from over the ridge in front of us—*whisk, whisk, whisk*, like metal files being scraped across bricks.

I recalled the vision Frigg had shown us of nine burly dudes with scythes. I thought, *Magnus, if those guys are over that hill, you might want a plan.*

“So, what exactly is a thrall?” I asked my friends.

Mallory wiped her brow. Our trip through the valley hadn’t done her fair complexion any favors. She’d be suffering a bad case of sunburn if we lived through the day. “Like I said earlier, a thrall is a slave. The ones we’re going to face—I’m pretty sure they’re giants.”

I tried to square that with what I knew about giants, which, granted, wasn’t much. “So...jotuns enslave other jotuns?”

Sam wrinkled her nose in distaste. “All the time. Humans gave up the practice centuries ago—”

“Some might dispute that,” Mallory grumbled.

“Fair point,” Sam agreed. “What I mean is, giants do it the way Vikings used to. Clans go to war against one another. They take prisoners of war and declare them personal property. Sometimes, the thralls can earn their freedom, sometimes not. Depends on the master.”

“Then maybe we can free these guys,” I suggested. “Get them on our side.”

Mallory snorted. “Unbeatable guardians of the mead—unless you offer them their freedom, in which case they’re pushovers!”

“I’m just saying—”

“Won’t be that easy, Beantown. Let’s stop dreaming and start fighting.”

She led the way over the hill, which struck me as only slightly less reckless than jumping out of a moving train.



## THIRTY-THREE

# We Devise a Horribly Fabulous Plan

**SO MUCH** for strategy.

We popped over the ridge and found ourselves at the edge of a wheat field several acres across. The wheat grew taller than us, which would have made it perfect for sneaking through, except that the guys working the field were taller still—nine giants, all swinging scythes. The setup reminded me of a video game level I'd played with T.J. once, but I had no wish to try it with my actual body.

Each thrall had an iron collar around his neck. Otherwise they wore nothing but loincloths and a whole lot of muscles. Their bronze skin, shaggy hair, and beards all dripped with perspiration. Despite their size and strength, they seemed to be having a hard time cutting the wheat. The stalks just bent against their scythe blades with a whisking sound like laughter, then sprang back up again. Because of this, the thralls looked almost as miserable as they smelled...and they smelled like Halfborn Gunderson's sandals.

Beyond the field loomed the wishbone-shaped waterfall. In the cliff face that jutted from the middle was a set of massive iron doors.

Before you could say *Darn it, Mallory*, the nearest thrall—who had a mop of red hair even more impressive than Miss Keen's—sniffed the air, stood up straight, and turned to face us. “Ho, ho!”

The other eight stopped working and turned toward us as well, adding, “Ho, ho! Ho, ho! Ho, ho!” like a flock of strange birds.

“What have we here?” asked the redhead thrall.

“What indeed?” asked another with an impressively tattooed face.

“What indeed?” asked a third, maybe just in case we hadn’t heard the tattooed guy.

“Kill them?” Red polled his buddies.

“Yes, probably kill them,” Tattoo agreed.

“Hold on!” I yelled before they could take a vote, which I had a feeling would be unanimous. “We’re here for a very important reason—”

“—which does *not* entail our deaths,” Sam added.

“Good point, Sam!” I nodded vigorously, and the thralls all nodded along, apparently impressed by my earnestness. “Tell them why we’re here, Mack!”

Mallory gave me her standard I’ll-kill-you-later-with-both-knives look. “Well, Beantown, we’re here to—to help these fine gentlemen!”

The nearest thrall, Red, frowned at his scythe. Its curved iron blade was almost as corroded as Jack had been when I first pulled him out of the Charles River.

“Don’t know how you could help,” Red said. “Unless you could harvest the field for us? Master only gives us these dull blades.”

The others muttered in agreement.

“And the wheat stalks are as hard as flint!” said Tattoo.

“Harder!” said another thrall. “And the wheat keeps growing back as soon as we cut it! We can only take a break when all the wheat is cut, but... we can’t ever finish!”

Red nodded. “It’s almost like...” His face darkened with effort. “Like Master doesn’t *want* us to ever take a break.”

The others nodded, pondering this theory.

“Ah, yes, your master!” Mallory said. “Who is your master again?”

“Baugi!” said Red. “Great thane of the stone giants! He’s off in the north getting ready for Doomsday.” He said this as if Baugi had just gone to the store to get some milk.

“He is a hard master,” Mallory noted.

“Yes!” Tattoo agreed.

“No,” Red said.

The others chimed in. “No. No, not at all! Kind and good!”

They glanced suspiciously from side to side, as if their master might be hiding in the wheat.

Sam cleared her throat. “Does Baugi give you any other duties?”

“Oh, yes!” said a thrall in the back. “We guard the doors! So no one can take Suttung’s mead or free Suttung’s prisoner!”

“The prisoner?” I asked. “Suttung?”

Nine thrall heads nodded solemnly. They would have made an excellent kindergarten class if the teacher could have found large enough coloring books and crayons.

“Suttung is the master’s brother,” said Red. “He owns the mead and the prisoner in the cave.”

Another thrall shrieked. “You are not supposed to say what is in the cave!”

“Right!” Red turned even redder. “Suttung owns the mead and the prisoner who—who may or may not be in the cave.”

The other thralls nodded, apparently satisfied Red had thrown us off the scent.

“If anyone tries to get past us,” said Tattoo, “we get to take a break from cutting wheat, just long enough to kill the trespassers.”

“So,” Red said, “if you are not here to cut the wheat, then do we get to kill you? That would be helpful! We could use a good killing break!”

“Killing break?” asked a guy in the back.

“Killing break!” said another.

The rest took up the call.

Nine giants shouting *killing break* tended to make me a little jumpy. I thought about pulling out Jack and having him cut the wheat for the thralls, but that would still leave us facing nine big dudes who were under orders to kill trespassers. Jack might be able to slay nine giants before they slew us, but I still didn’t like the idea of chopping down thralls when I could be chopping down their masters.

“What if we freed you?” I asked. “Just for the sake of argument. Would you turn on your master? Would you run away to your homeland?”

The thralls got dreamy looks in their eyes.

“We might do those things,” Tattoo agreed.

“And would you help us?” Sam asked. “Or even just leave us alone?”

“Oh, no!” Red said. “No, first we would kill you. We love killing humans.”

The other eight nodded enthusiastically.

Mallory glared at me like *I told you so*. “Also for the sake of argument, noble thralls, what if we fought you? Could we kill you?”

Red laughed. "That is very funny! No, we are under strong magic spells. Baugi is a great sorcerer! We cannot be killed by anyone except each other."

"And we like each other!" said another thrall.

"Yes!" said a third.

The giants started to bring it in for a group hug, then seemed to remember they were holding scythes.

"Well, then!" Mallory's eyes gleamed like she had a wonderful idea I was going to hate. "I know exactly how we can help you!"

She fished around in her jacket pocket and brought out the whetstone. "Ta-da!"

The thralls looked less than impressed.

"It is a rock," Red said.

"Oh, no, my friend," Mallory said. "This whetstone can magically sharpen *any* blade and make your work much easier. May I show you?"

She held out her empty hand. After a few minutes of deep thought, Red flinched. "Oh, you want my scythe?"

"To sharpen it," Sam explained.

"So...I can work faster?"

"Exactly."

"Huh." Red handed over his weapon.

The scythe was huge, so it took all three of us to do the job. I held the handle. Sam kept the top of the blade flat against the ground while Mallory scraped the whetstone along the edges. Sparks flew. Rust vanished. In a couple of passes, both sides of the scythe blade glinted like new in the sunlight.

"Next scythe, please!" Mallory said.

Soon, all nine thralls had shiny sharpened weapons.

"Now," Mallory said, "try them out on your field!"

The thralls went to work, cutting through the wheat like it was wrapping paper. In a matter of minutes, they had reaped the entire field.

"Amazing!" said Red.

"Hooray!" said Tattoo.

The other thralls cheered and hooted.

"We can finally have water!" said one.

"I can eat lunch!" said another.

"I have needed to pee for five hundred years!" said a third.

"We can kill these trespassers now!" said a fourth.

I hated that guy.

“Ah, yes.” Red frowned at us. “Sorry, my new friends, but by helping us, you have clearly trespassed on our master’s field, and so you are not our friends and we must kill you.”

I wasn’t a fan of this giantish logic. Then again, we’d just given nine huge enemies sharper weapons to kill us with, so I wasn’t in a position to criticize.

“Hold on, boys!” Mallory shouted. She waggled the whetstone between her fingertips. “Before you kill us, you should decide who gets the stone!”

Red frowned. “Who gets...the stone?”

“Well, yes,” Mallory said. “Look, the field is already growing back!”

Sure enough, the wheat stubble was already up to the giants’ ankles.

“You’ll need the whetstone to keep your blades sharp,” Mallory continued. “Otherwise they’ll just get dull again. The wheat will eventually grow back as high as it was before, and you won’t have any more breaks.”

“And that would be bad,” Red concluded.

“Right,” Mallory agreed. “You can’t share custody of the stone, either. It can only be owned by one of you.”

“Really?” said Tattoo. “But why?”

Mallory shrugged. “Those are the rules.”

Red nodded sagely. “I think we can trust her. She has red hair.”

“Well, then!” Mallory said. “Who gets it?”

All nine thralls shouted, “ME!”

“Tell you what,” Mallory said, “how about a toss-up? Whoever catches it wins.”

“That sounds fair,” Red agreed.

I saw where this was going a little too late. Sam said uneasily, “Mallory...”

Mallory tossed the stone above the thralls’ heads. All nine rushed in to catch it, piling into each other while holding sharp, long, awkward blades. In such a situation, what you end up with is a large pile of dead thralls.

Sam stared wide-eyed at the scene. “Wow. Mallory, that was—”

“Did you have a better idea?” Mallory snapped.

“I’m not criticizing. I just—”

“I killed nine giants with one stone.” Mallory’s voice sounded hoarse. She blinked as if sparks from the whetstone were still flying in her eyes. “I

think that's pretty good for a day's work. Now come on. Let's open those doors."



## First Prize: A Giant! Second Prize: Two Giants!

I DIDN'T think Mallory was as okay with killing the thralls as she let on.

When we failed to open the doors with Jack, brute force, or any amount of yelling *open sesame*, Mallory screamed in rage. She kicked one of the doors, broke her foot, then hopped off cursing and crying.

Samirah frowned. "Magnus, go talk to her."

"Why me?" I didn't like the way Mallory was slashing the air with her knives.

"Because you can heal her foot," Sam said, annoyingly sensible as usual. "And I need time to think about this door problem."

That didn't strike me as a good trade-off, but I went, Jack floating along next to me, saying, "Ah, Norway! Good memories! Ah, a pile of dead thralls! Good memories!"

I stopped just out of reach of Mallory's knives. "Hey, Mack, can I heal that foot for you?"

She glowered. "Fine. Seems to be Heal Mallory's Stupid Injuries day."

I knelt and put my hands on her boot. She cursed when I mended the bones, popping them back into place with a burst of summery magic.

I rose warily. "How you doing?"

"Well, you just healed me, didn't you?"

"I wasn't talking about the foot." I gestured toward the dead thralls.

She scowled. "I didn't see any other way. Did you?"

In truth, I didn't. I was pretty sure Mallory's solution was the way we'd been *meant* to use the whetstone. The gods, or our wyrd, or some twisted sense of Nornish humor had dictated that we would sail halfway across the

world, undergo many hardships to win a gray rock, then use it to trick nine miserable thralls into killing one another.

“Sam and I couldn’t have done it,” I admitted. “You’re the doer, just like Frigg said.”

Jack floated over, his blade shuddering and warbling like a hand saw. “Frigg? Oh, man, I don’t like Frigg. She’s too quiet. Too devious. Too—”

“She’s my ma,” Mallory grumbled.

“Oh, *that* Frigg!” Jack said. “Yeah, she’s great.”

“I hate her,” Mallory said.

“Gods, me too!” Jack commiserated.

“Jack,” I said, “why don’t you go check on Sam? Maybe you can advise her on getting through those doors. Or you could sing to her. I know she’d love that.”

“Yeah? Cool!” Jack zoomed off to serenade Sam, which meant Sam would want to hit me later, except it was Ramadan, so she had to be nice to me. Wow, I was a bad person.

Mallory tested her weight on her foot. It seemed to work fine. I did good healing for a bad person.

“I’ll be okay,” she said, without much confidence. “Just been a lot for one day. Learning about Frigg, on top of...everything else.”

I thought about Mallory and Halfborn’s constant arguments on the ship. I did not understand their relationship, but I knew they needed each other as much as Hearthstone needed Blitzen or our Viking boat needed to be yellow. It didn’t make much sense. It wasn’t easy. But it was just the way things had to be.

“It’s eating him up inside,” I told her. “You two arguing.”

“Well, he’s a fool.” She hesitated. “I mean...assuming you’re talking about Gunderson.”

“Smooth, Mack,” I said.

“Shut up, Beantown.” She marched off to check on Sam.

At the doors, Jack was trying to help by suggesting songs he could sing to inspire new ideas for getting inside: “Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door,” “I Got the Keys,” or “Break on Through (to the Other Side).”

“How about none of the above?” Sam said.

“‘None of the Above’...” Jack mused. “Is that by Stevie Wonder?”

“How’s it going, guys?” I asked. I didn’t know if it was physically possible to strangle a magic sword, but I didn’t want to see Sam try.

“Not well,” she admitted. “There’s no lock. No hinges. No keyhole. Jack refuses to try cutting through the iron—”

“Hey,” Jack said. “These doors are a *masterpiece*. Look at that craftsmanship! Besides, I’m pretty sure they’re magic.”

Sam rolled her eyes. “If we had a drill, maybe we could make a hole in the iron and I could slither through as a snake. But since we don’t have a drill—”

From the other side of the doors, a woman’s voice called, “Have you tried prying apart the seam?”

We all jumped back. The voice had sounded very close to the door, as if the woman had been listening with her ear pressed to the metal.

Jack quivered and glowed. “She speaks! Oh, beautiful door, speak again!”

“I’m not the door,” said the voice. “I am Gunlod, daughter of Suttung.”

“Oh,” Jack said. “That’s disappointing.”

Mallory put her mouth to the door. “You’re Suttung’s daughter? Are you guarding the prisoner?”

“No,” Gunlod said. “I *am* the prisoner. I’ve been locked in here all by myself for...Actually, I’ve lost track of time. Centuries? Years? Which is longer?”

I turned to my friends and used sign language, which was helpful even when there wasn’t a Hearthstone around. *Trap?*

Mallory made a V and whacked the back of her hand against her forehead, meaning *stupid*. Or *duh*.

*Not much choice*, Sam signed. Then she called through the doors, “Miss Gunlod, I don’t suppose there’s a latch on the inside? Or a bolt you could turn?”

“Well, it wouldn’t be a very good prison if my father put a latch or a bolt where I could reach it. He usually just yanks the doors open with my Uncle Baugi. It takes both of them with their super giant strength. You don’t have two people out there with super giant strength, by chance?”

Sam sized me up. “I’m afraid not.”

I stuck out my tongue at her. “Miss Gunlod, is Kvasir’s Mead in there with you, by chance?”

“A little,” she said. “Most of it was stolen by Odin a long time ago.” She sighed. “What a charmer he was! I let him get away, which of course is

why my father locked me up. But there's still some left at the bottom of the last vat. It's my father's most prized possession. I suppose you want it?"

"That would be great," I admitted.

Mallory elbowed me in the ribs. "If you could help us, Miss Gunlod, we'd be happy to free you, too."

"How sweet!" said Gunlod. "But I'm afraid my freedom is impossible. My father and my uncle have bound my life force to this cave. That's part of my punishment. I would die if I tried to leave."

Sam winced. "That seems a bit harsh."

"Yes." Gunlod sighed. "Though I did give the most valuable elixir in the Nine Worlds to our greatest enemy, so...there's that. My son tried to undo the spell on the cave, but even he failed. And he's the god Bragi!"

Mallory's eyes widened. "Your son is Bragi, god of poetry?"

"That's him." Gunlod's voice filled with pride. "He was born here, nine months after Odin visited me. I may have mentioned, Odin was a charmer."

"Bragi," I said. "Is he braggy?"

Mallory signed, *Don't ruin things, idiot.* "Magnus is only kidding. Of course he knows that *brag* literally means to recite poetry. Which is why Bragi is a lovely name. Bragging is a fantastic skill."

I blinked. "Right, I knew that. So anyway, Miss Gunlod, you said something about prying the seam?"

"Yes, I think it might be possible," she said. "With two blades, you might be able to wedge the doors apart just enough for me to get a glimpse of your faces, have a breath of fresh air, maybe see sunlight again. That would be quite enough for me. Do you still have sunlight?"

"For now, yeah," I said, "though Ragnarok may be coming up soon. We're hoping to use the mead to stop it."

"I see," Gunlod said. "I think my son Bragi would approve of that."

"Then if we manage to pry the doors apart," I said, "do you think you could pass us the mead through the opening?"

"Hmm, yes. I have an old garden hose here. I could siphon the mead from the vat, as long as you have a container to put it in."

I wasn't sure why Gunlod would have an old garden hose lying around in her cave. Maybe she grew mushrooms in there, or maybe the hose was to activate her Slip 'N Slide.

Sam pulled a canteen from her belt. Of course the fasting girl was the only one who had remembered to bring water. "I've got a container,

Gunlod.”

“Wonderful!” Gunlod said. “Now you’ll need two blades—thin and very strong. Otherwise they’ll break.”

“Don’t look at me!” Jack said. “I’m one thick blade, and I’m too young to break!”

Mallory sighed. She unsheathed her knives. “Miss Gunlod, it so happens I have two thin, supposedly unbreakable daggers. You might want to step back from the doors now.” Mallory jammed the points of her weapons into the seam. They were just narrow enough to wedge inside, almost up to the hilts. Then Mallory pushed the grips away from each other, prying the doors apart.

With a vast creaking sound, the doors parted, forming a V-shaped crack no more than an inch wide where the knives crossed. Mallory’s arms trembled. She must have been using all her einherji strength to keep the seam open. Beads of perspiration dotted her forehead.

“Hurry,” she grunted.

On the other side of the doors, Gunlod’s face appeared—pale but beautiful icy blue eyes framed by wisps of golden hair. She inhaled deeply. “Oh, fresh air! And sunlight! Thank you so much.”

“No problem,” I said. “So, about that old hose...”

“Yes! I’ve got it ready.” Through the crack, she fed the end of an old black rubber hose. Sam fit it into the mouth of her canteen, and liquid began gurgling into the metal container. After so many challenges trying to win the Mead of Kvasir, I hadn’t expected the sound of victory to make me want to find a urinal.

“Okay, that’s it,” Gunlod said. The hose retracted. Her face reappeared. “Good luck stopping Ragnarok. I hope you become wonderful braggers!”

“Thanks,” I said. “Are you sure we can’t try to free you? We’ve got a friend back at our ship who’s good with magic.”

“Oh, you’d never have time,” Gunlod said. “Baugi and Suttung will be here any minute.”

Sam squeaked, “What?”

“Didn’t I mention the silent alarm?” Gunlod asked. “It triggers as soon as you start messing with the doors. I imagine you have two, maybe three minutes before my father and uncle swoop down on you. You should hurry. Nice meeting you!”

Mallory pulled her knives out of the seam. The doors clunked together once more.

“And that,” she said, wiping her brow, “is why I don’t trust nice people.”

“Guys.” I pointed north, toward the tops of the mountains. Gleaming in the Norwegian sunlight, growing larger by the second, were the forms of two massive eagles.



THIRTY-FIVE

## I Get an Assist from the Murder Murder

“WELP,” I SAID, which was usually how I started conversations about ways to save our butts from certain destruction. “Any ideas?”

“Drink the mead?” Mallory suggested.

Sam rattled her canteen. “Sounds like there’s only one swig in here. If it doesn’t work fast enough, or it wears off before Magnus faces Loki...”

A squadron of tiny T.J.s started bayoneting my gut. Now that we’d gotten the mead, my looming challenge with Loki felt too real, too imminent. I forced that fear to the back burner. I had more immediate problems.

“I don’t think poetry is going to help with these guys,” I said. “Jack, what are our odds in combat?”

“Hmmm,” Jack said. “Baugi and Suttung. I know them by reputation. Strong. Bad. I can take down one of them, most likely, but both at once, before they manage to squash you all flat...?”

“Can we outrun them?” I asked. “Outfly them? Get back to the ship for reinforcements?”

Sadly, I already knew the answer. Watching the eagles fly, seeing how big their forms had gotten in the past minute, I knew they’d be on us soon. These guys were fast.

Sam slung the canteen over her shoulder. “I might be able to outfly them, at least as far as the ship, but carrying two people? Impossible. Carrying even one will slow me down.”

“Then we divide and conquer,” Mallory said. “Sam, take the mead. Fly back to the ship. Maybe one giant will follow you. If not, well, Magnus and

I will do our best against both of them. At least you'll get the mead back to the others."

Somewhere off to my left, a little voice chirped: *The redhead is smart. We can help.*

In a nearby tree sat a murder of crows. (That's what you call a group of them. You learn useless facts like that in Valhalla.) "Uh, guys," I told my friends, "those crows claim they can help."

*Claim?* squawked another crow. *You don't trust us? Send your two friends back to the ship with the mead. We'll give you a hand here. All we ask for in return is something shiny. Anything will do.*

I related this to my friends.

Mallory glanced toward the horizon. The giant eagles were getting awfully close. "But if Sam tries to carry me, I'll slow her down."

"The walnut!" Sam said. "Maybe you can fit inside—"

"Oh, no."

"We're wasting time!" Sam said.

"Gah!" Mallory fished out the shell and opened the halves. "How do I —?"

Imagine a silk scarf getting sucked into the nozzle of a vacuum cleaner, disappearing with a rude *slurp*. That's pretty much what happened to Mallory. The walnut closed and dropped to the ground, a tiny voice inside yelling Gaelic curses.

Sam snatched up the nut. "Magnus, you sure about this?"

"I'm fine. I've got Jack."

"You've got Jack!" Jack sang.

Sam shot skyward, leaving me with just my sword and a flock of birds.

I looked at the crows. "Okay, guys, what's the plan?"

*Plan?* cawed the nearest crow. *We just said we'd help. We don't have a plan, per se.*

Stupid misleading crows. Also, what kind of bird uses the term *per se*?

Since I didn't have time to murder the entire murder, I contemplated my limited options. "Fine. When I give you guys the signal, fly in the nearest giant's face and try to distract him."

*Sure,* chirped a different crow. *What's the signal?*

Before I could think of one, a huge eagle plummeted down and landed in front of me.

The only good news, if you could call it that: the other eagle kept flying, pursuing Sam. We had divided. Now we needed to conquer.

I hoped the eagle in front of me would morph into a small, easy-to-defeat giant, preferably one who used Nerf weapons. Instead, he rose to thirty feet tall, his skin like chipped obsidian. He had Gunlod's blond hair and pale blue eyes, which looked very strange with the rocky volcanic skin. Ice and snow flecked his whiskers like he'd been face-diving in a box of Frosted Flakes. His armor was stitched from various hides, including some that looked like endangered species: zebra, elephant, einherji. In the giant's hand glittered an onyx double-sided ax.

"WHO DARES STEAL FROM THE MIGHTY SUTTUNG?" he bellowed. "I JUST FLEW IN FROM NIFLHEIM, AND BOY, ARE MY ARMS TIRED!"

I couldn't think of any response that did not involve high-pitched screaming.

Jack floated right up to the giant. "I don't know, man," he volunteered. "Some dude just swiped your mead and took off that way. I think he said his name was Hrungnir." Jack pointed in the general direction of York, England.

I thought that was a pretty good fake-out, but Suttung only frowned.

"Nice try," he rumbled. "Hrungnir would never dare cross me. You are the thieves, and you have pulled me away from important work! We are about to launch the great ship *Naglfar*! I can't be flying home every time the alarm goes off!"

"So *Naglfar* is close, then?" I asked.

"Oh, not too far," Suttung admitted. "Once you cross into Jotunheim, you follow the coast to the border of Niflheim and..." He scowled. "Stop trying to trick me! You are thieves and you must die!"

He raised his ax.

"Wait!" I yelled.

"Why?" demanded the giant.

"Yeah, why?" demanded Jack.

I hated it when my sword sided with a giant. Jack was ready to fight, but I had bad memories of Hrungnir, the last stone giant we'd faced. He hadn't been an easy slice-and-dice. Also, he exploded on death. I wanted every

advantage I could get against Suttung, including the use of my murder of unhelpful crows, for whom I had not yet thought of a signal.

“You claim we’re thieves,” I said, “but how’d you get that mead, thief?”

Suttung kept his ax suspended over his head, giving us an unfortunate view of his blond underarm hair in his obsidian armpits. “I am no thief! My parents were slain by two evil little dwarves, Fjalar and Gjalar.”

“Ah, I hate those guys,” I said.

“Right?” Suttung agreed. “I would have slaughtered them as payback, but they offered me Kvasir’s Mead instead. It is mine by right of wergild!”

“Oh.” That kind of took the wind out of my argument. “Still, that mead was created from the blood of Kvasir, a murdered god. It belongs to the gods!”

“So you would make things right,” the giant summed up, “by stealing the mead yet again for yourself? And killing my brother’s thralls in the process?”

I may have mentioned that I don’t like giant logic.

“Maybe?” I said. Then, in a stroke of genius, I thought of a signal for my avian allies: “EAT CROW!”

Sadly, the crows were slow to recognize my brilliance.

Suttung yelled, “DIE!”

Jack tried to intercept the ax, but it had gravity, momentum, and the force of a giant behind it. Jack did not. I dove aside as the ax split the field where I’d been standing.

Meanwhile, the crows had a leisurely conversation.

*Why did he say “eat crow”?* one cawed.

*It’s an idiomatic expression,* another explained. *It means:* to admit you were wrong.

*Yes, but why did he say it?* asked a third.

“RARRRR!” Suttung yanked his ax from the ground.

Jack flew into my hand. “We can take him together, señor!”

I really hoped those were not going to be the last words I ever heard.

*Crows, one of the crows said. Hey, wait a minute. We’re crows. I bet that was the signal!*

“Yes!” I yelped. “Get him!”

“Okay!” Jack yelled happily. “We will!”

Suttung raised his ax over his head once more. Jack pulled me into battle as the murder of crows rose from their tree and swarmed Suttung’s

face, pecking at his eyes and nose and Frosted Flakes beard.

The giant roared, stumbling and blind.

“Ha, HA!” Jack yelled. “We have you now!”

He yanked me forward. Together, we plunged Jack into the giant’s left foot.

Suttung howled. His ax slipped from his hands, the heavy blade impaling itself in the skull of its owner. And that, kids, is why you should never use a battle-ax without wearing your safety helmet.

The giant fell with a thunderous *THUD*, right on top of the pile of thralls.

The crows settled on the grass around me.

*That wasn’t very chivalrous*, one remarked. *But you’re a Viking, so I guess chivalry doesn’t apply.*

*You’re right, Godfrey*, another agreed. *Chivalry was more of a late-medieval concept.*

A third crow cawed: *You’re both forgetting about the Normans—*

*Bill, just stop*, said Godfrey. *No one cares about your doctoral thesis on the Norman invasion.*

*Shiny things?* asked the second crow. *We get shiny things now?*

The entire murder peered at me with beady, greedy black eyes.

“Uh...” I only had one shiny thing—Jack, who was presently doing his victory dance around the giant’s corpse, singing, “Who killed a giant? I killed a giant! Who’s a giant killah? I’m a giant killah!”

As tempting as it was to leave him with the crows, I thought I might need my sword the next time a giant had to be stabbed in the foot.

Then I glanced at the pile of dead thralls.

“Right over there!” I told the crows. “Nine extremely shiny scythe blades! Will those do?”

*Hmm, said Bill. I’m not sure where we’d put them.*

*We could rent a storage unit,* suggested Godfrey.

*Good idea!* said Bill. *Very well, dead mortal boy. It was nice doing business with you.*

“Just be careful,” I warned. “Those blades are sharp.”

*Oh, don’t worry about us,* squawked Godfrey. *You’ve got the most dangerous path ahead of you. You’ll only find one friendly port between here and the Ship of the Dead—if you can even call the fortress of Skadi friendly.*

I shivered, remembering what Njord had told me about his estranged wife.

*It's a wretched place, Bill cawed. Cold, cold, cold. And no shiny things, like, at all. Now if you'll excuse us, we have to start picking our way through all this carrion to get at those shiny blades.*

*I love our job,* said Godfrey.

*Agreed!* squawked the other crows.

They fluttered over to the pile of bodies and went to work, which was not something I wanted to watch.

Before the murder could murder themselves on the scythe blades and blame me for it, Jack and I began our long hike back to the *Big Banana*.

## The Ballad of Halfborn, Hovel-Hero

OUR CREW had taken care of the other giant.

I could tell because of the badly hacked-up, decapitated giant body sprawling on the beach next to our dock. His head was nowhere to be seen. A few fishermen made their way around the corpse, holding their noses. Maybe they thought the giant was a dead whale.

Samirah stood grinning on the dock. “Welcome back, Magnus! We were getting worried.”

I tried to match her smile. “Nah. I’m fine.”

I explained what had happened with the crows and Suttung.

The hike to the ship had actually been pleasant—just me and Jack enjoying the meadows and rural back roads of Norway. Along the way, goats and birds had made critical comments about my personal hygiene, but I couldn’t blame them. I looked like I’d trekked through half the country and rolled down the other half.

“Kid!” Blitzen came running down the gangplank, Hearthstone right behind him. “I’m glad you’re okay—Oh, yikes!” Blitz stepped back hastily. “You smell like that Dumpster on Park Street.”

“Thanks,” I said. “That’s the smell I was going for.”

I couldn’t tell much about Blitz’s condition since he wore his anti-sun netting, but he sounded cheerful enough.

Hearthstone looked much better, like a solid day of sleep had taken the edge off our experiences in Alfheim. The pink-and-green scarf from Alex looped jauntily across his black leather lapels.

*Stone was useful?* he signed.

I thought about the pile of dead bodies we'd left in the valley. *We got the mead*, I signed. *Couldn't have done it without the whetstone*.

Hearth nodded, apparently satisfied. *You do smell, though*.

"So I've been told." I gestured at the corpse of the giant. "What happened here?"

"That," Sam said, her eyes twinkling, "was all Halfborn Gunderson." She yelled toward the deck of the ship, "Halfborn!"

The berserker was having a heated conversation with T.J., Alex, and Mallory. He looked relieved to come to the railing.

"Ah, there he is!" Halfborn said. "Magnus, would you please explain to T.J. that those thralls had to die? He's giving Mack a hard time about it."

Three things struck me about this:

The nickname Mack had been officially adopted.

Halfborn was *defending* Mallory Keen.

And, oh, right. It figured that T.J., being the son of a freed slave, might have a wee bit of a problem with us slaughtering nine thralls.

"They were *slaves*," T.J. said, his voice heavy with anger. "I get what happened. I get the reasoning. But still...you guys killed them. You can't expect me to be okay with that."

"They were *jotuns*!" Halfborn said. "They weren't even human!"

Blitz cleared his throat. "A gentle reminder, berserker. Hearth and I aren't human, either."

"Ah, you know what I mean. I can't believe I'm saying this, but Mack did the right thing."

"Don't defend me," Mallory snapped. "That makes it so much worse." She faced Thomas Jefferson Jr. "I'm sorry it had to happen that way, T.J. I really am. It was a bloody mess."

T.J. hesitated. Mallory so rarely apologized that when she did, it carried a lot of force. T.J. gave her a grudging nod—not like everything was okay, but like he would at least consider her words. He glared at Halfborn, but Mallory put her hand on the infantryman's shoulder. I remembered what Sam had said about T.J. and Halfborn once being enemies. Now I could see just how much they needed Mallory to keep them on the same team.

"I'm going below." T.J. glanced over at the corpse of the giant. "The air is fresher down there." He marched off.

Alex puffed out her cheeks. "Honestly, I don't see that you guys had much choice. But you'll have to give T.J. some processing time. He was

already pretty miffed since we spent our morning searching Fläm and found nothing but tourists and troll souvenirs.”

Blitzen grunted. “At least we have the mead now. So this wasn’t all for nothing.”

I hoped he was right. Whether I could defeat Loki in a flyting...that remained to be seen, and I had the feeling that no matter how magical the mead was, my success would depend on *me*. Alas, *me* was my least favorite person to depend on.

“But what about this giant?” I asked, anxious to change the subject.  
“He’s Baugi, right? How did you kill him?”

Everybody looked at Halfborn.

“Oh, come on!” Halfborn protested. “You guys helped a lot.”

Hearthstone signed, *Blitz and I slept through it.*

“T.J. and I tried to fight him,” Alex admitted. “But Baugi dropped a building on us.” She pointed down the shoreline. I hadn’t noticed it before, but one of the lovely blue cottages of Fläm had been scooped up from its spot on Main Street—which now had a gaping hole like a missing tooth—and slammed onto the beach, where the cottage had collapsed like a deflated bouncy house. What the locals made of this, I had no idea, but nobody seemed to be running around town in a panic.

“By the time I got back to the ship,” Sam said, “the giant was only thirty seconds behind me. I had just enough energy left to explain what was happening. Halfborn took it from there.”

The berserker glowered. “It wasn’t so much.”

“*Not so much?*” Sam turned to me. “Baugi landed in the middle of town, turned into giant form, and started stomping around and yelling threats.”

“He called Fläm a dirty hovel,” Halfborn grumbled. “Nobody says that about my hometown.”

“Halfborn charged him,” Sam continued. “Baugi was like forty feet tall  
—”

“Forty-five,” Alex corrected.

“And he had this glamour cast over him, so he looked extra terrifying.”

“Like Godzilla.” Alex considered. “Or maybe my dad. I have trouble telling them apart.”

“But Halfborn just charged right in,” Sam continued, “yelling ‘*For Fläm!*’”

“Not the best war cry,” Gunderson admitted. “Luckily for me, the giant wasn’t as strong as he looked.”

Alex snorted. “He was plenty strong. You just went...well, berserk.” Alex cupped her hand like she was telling me a secret. “This guy is *scary* when he goes into full berserker mode. He literally hacked the giant’s feet out from under him. Then, when Baugi fell to his knees, Halfborn went to work on the rest of him.”

Gunderson harrumphed. “Ah, now, Fierro, you wired off his head. It went flying”—he gestured into the fjord—“somewhere out there.”

“Baugi was almost dead by that point,” Alex insisted. “He was in the process of falling over. That’s the only reason the head flew so far.”

“Well,” Halfborn said, “he’s dead. That’s all that matters.”

Mallory spat over the side of the boat. “And I missed the whole thing, because I was stuck inside the walnut.”

“Yes,” Halfborn muttered. “Yes, you did.”

Was it my imagination, or did Halfborn sound disappointed that Mallory had missed his moment of glory?

“Once you’re in the walnut,” Mallory said, “you can’t get out until somebody *lets* you out. Sam didn’t remember I was in there for, like, twenty minutes—”

“Oh, come on,” Sam said. “It was more like five.”

“Felt longer.”

“Mmm.” Halfborn nodded. “I imagine time goes slower when you’re inside a nut.”

“Shut up, oaf,” Mallory growled.

Halfborn grinned. “So are we making sail, or what? Time’s a-wasting!”

The temperature dropped as we sailed into the sunset. Amidships, Sam did her evening prayer. Hearthstone and Blitzen sat at the prow, gazing in quiet awe at the fjord walls. Mallory went below to check on T.J. and cook up some dinner.

I stood at the rudder next to Halfborn Gunderson, listening to the sail ripple in the wind and the magical oars swish through the water in perfect time.

“I’m fine,” Halfborn said.

“Hmm?” I glanced over. His face was blue in the evening shadows, like he’d painted it for combat (as he sometimes did).

“You were going to ask if I was okay,” he said. “That’s why you’re standing here, right? I’m fine.”

“Ah. Good.”

“I’ll admit it was strange walking through the streets of Fläm, thinking about how I grew up there in a little hut with just my mom. Prettier place than I remembered. And I may have wondered what would’ve happened if I’d stayed there, gotten married, had a life.”

“Right.”

“And when Baugi insulted the place, I lost it. I wasn’t expecting to have any...you know, *feelings* about being home.”

“Sure.”

“It’s not like I expect anybody to write a ballad about me saving my hometown.” He tilted his head as if he could almost hear the melody. “I’m glad to be out of that place again. I don’t regret my choices when I was alive, even if I did leave my mom behind and never saw her again.”

“Okay.”

“And Mallory meeting her own mother...that didn’t raise any particular emotions in me. I’m just glad Mack found out the truth, even if she did run off on a wild train ride without telling us, and could’ve gotten herself killed, and I never would’ve known what happened to her. Oh, and you and Sam, too, of course.”

“Of course.”

Halfborn hit the rudder handle. “But *curse* that vixen! What was she *thinking*? ”

“Uh—”

“The daughter of *Frigg*?” Halfborn’s laugh sounded a little hysterical. “No wonder she’s so...” He waved his hand, making signs that could’ve meant almost anything: *Exasperating?* *Fantastic?* *Angry?* *Food processor?*

“Mmm,” I said.

Halfborn patted my shoulder. “Thanks, Magnus. I’m glad we had this talk. You’re all right, for a healer.”

“Appreciate it.”

“Take the rudder, will you? Just stay in the middle of the fjord and watch out for krakens.”

“Krakens?” I protested.

Halfborn nodded absently and went below, maybe to check on dinner, or Mallory and T.J., or simply because I smelled bad.

By full dark, we'd reached the open sea. I didn't crash the ship or release any krakens, which was good. I did not want to be *that* guy.

Samirah came aft and took over rudder duty from me. She was chewing Medjool dates with her usual expression of post-fast ecstasy. "How are you holding up?"

I shrugged. "Considering the kind of day we've had? Good, I guess."

She raised her canteen and sloshed around Kvasir's Mead. "You want to take charge of this? Smell it or sip it or something, just to test it?"

The idea made me nauseous. "Keep it for now, please. I'll wait until I absolutely have to drink it."

"Sensible. The effect might not be permanent."

"It's not just that," I said. "I'm afraid I'll drink it and—and it won't be enough. That I *still* won't be able to beat Loki."

Sam looked like she wanted to give me a hug, though hugging a boy wasn't something a good Muslima would ever do. "I wonder the same thing, Magnus. Not about you, but about me. Who knows if I'll have the strength to face my father again? Who knows if any of us will?"

"Is that supposed to boost my morale?"

Sam laughed. "All we can do is try, Magnus. I choose to believe that our hardships make us stronger. Everything we've been through on this voyage—it *matters*. It increases our chances of victory."

I glanced toward the prow. Blitzen and Hearthstone had fallen asleep side by side in their sleeping bags at the base of the dragon figurehead. It seemed a strange place to sleep, given our adventure in Alfheim, but they both seemed at peace.

"I hope you're right, Sam," I said. "Because some of it's been pretty rough."

Sam sighed as if letting go of all the hunger, thirst, and curse words she'd kept inside while fasting. "I know. I think the hardest thing we can ever do is see someone for who they really are. Our parents. Our friends. Ourselves."

I wondered if she was thinking about Loki, or maybe herself. She could have been talking about any of us on the ship. None of us were free of our pasts. During the voyage, we'd looked into some pretty harsh mirrors.

My moment at the mirror was yet to come. When I faced Loki, I was sure he'd delight in magnifying my every fault, stripping bare my every fear and weakness. If he could, he would reduce me to a sniveling grease spot.

We had until tomorrow to reach *Naglfar*, Frigg had said...or the next day at the latest. I found myself wavering, almost wishing we would miss the deadline so I wouldn't have to face Loki one-on-one. But no. My friends were counting on me. For the sake of everybody I knew, everybody I *didn't* know...I had to delay Ragnarok as long as possible. I had to give Sam and Amir a chance at a normal life, and Annabeth and Percy, and Percy's baby sister, Estelle. They all deserved better than planetary destruction.

I said good night to Sam, then spread my own sleeping bag out on the deck.

I slept fitfully, dreaming of dragons and thralls, of falling down mountains and battling clay giants. Loki's laughter echoed in my ears. Over and over, the deck turned into a gruesome patchwork of dead men's keratin, enfolding me in a disgusting toenail cocoon.

"Good morning," said Blitzen, jolting me awake.

The morning was bitter cold and steel gray. I sat up, breaking a sheet of ice that had formed on my sleeping bag. Off our starboard side, snowcapped mountains loomed even taller than the fjords of Norway. All around us, the sea was a broken-up puzzle of ice blocks. The deck was completely glazed in frost, turning our bright yellow warship the color of weak lemonade.

Blitzen was the only other person on deck. He was bundled up, but he wasn't wearing any sun protection, despite the fact that it was clearly daytime. That could only mean one thing.

"We're not in Midgard anymore," I guessed.

Blitzen smiled wearily, no humor in his eyes. "We've been in Jotunheim for hours now, kid. The others are below, trying to stay warm. You...well, being the son of the summer god, you're more resistant to cold, but even *you* are going to start having trouble soon. Judging from how fast the temperature is dropping, we're getting close to the borders of Niflheim."

I shivered instinctively. Niflheim, the primordial realm of ice: one of the few worlds I hadn't yet visited, and one I wasn't anxious to explore.

"How will we know when we're there?" I asked.

The ship lurched with a juddering noise that loosened my joints. I staggered to my feet. The *Big Banana* was dead in the water. The surface of

the sea had turned to solid ice in every direction.

“I’d say we’re here.” Blitz sighed. “Let’s hope Hearthstone can summon some magical fire. Otherwise we’re all going to freeze to death within the hour.”

## Alex Bites My Face Off

I HAVE DIED many painful deaths. I've been impaled, decapitated, burned, drowned, crushed, and thrown off the terrace of floor 103.

I prefer all of those to hypothermia.

After only a few minutes, my lungs felt like I was breathing glass dust. We got all hands on deck—another nautical term I finally understood—to deal with the ice problem, but we had little success. I sent Jack out to break up the floe in front of us, while Halfborn and T.J. used poleaxes to chip away at the port and starboard sides. Sam flew ahead with a rope and tried to tug us along. Alex turned into a walrus and pushed from behind. I was too cold to make any jokes about how nice she looked with tusks, whiskers, and flippers.

Hearthstone summoned a new rune:



He explained this was *kenaz*: the torch, the fire of life. Instead of disappearing in a flash, like most runes did, *kenaz* continued to burn above the foredeck—a floating bend of fire five feet high, melting the frost on the deck and rigging. *Kenaz* kept us warm enough to avoid instant death, but Blitz fretted that sustaining the rune for an extended period would also burn up Hearth's energy. A few months ago, expending so much energy would have killed him. Now he was stronger. Still, I worried, too.

I found a pair of binoculars in the supplies and scanned the mountains for any promise of shelter or harbor. I saw nothing but sheer rock.

I didn't realize my fingers were turning blue until Blitz pointed it out. I summoned a little Frey-warmth into my hands, but the effort made me dizzy. Using the power of summer here was like trying to remember everything that had happened on my first day of elementary school. I knew summer still existed, somewhere, but it was so distant, so vague, I could barely conjure a memory of it.

"B-blitz, y-you don't look affected," I noted.

He scratched the ice from his beard. "Dwarves do well in the cold. You and I will be the last ones to freeze to death. But that's not much comfort."

Mallory, Blitz, and I tried using oars to push away the ice as Halfborn and T.J. broke it up. We alternated duties, going belowdecks two or three at a time to warm up, though below wasn't much warmer. We would have made faster time just getting out and walking, but Walrus Alex reported that the ice had some nasty thin spots. Also, we had nowhere to shelter. At least the ship offered supplies and some cover from the wind.

My arms started to go numb. I got so used to shivering I couldn't tell whether it had started to snow or my vision was blurred. The fiery rune was the only thing keeping us alive, but its light and heat slowly faded. Hearthstone sat cross-legged beneath the kenaz, his eyes closed in intense concentration. Beads of sweat dripped from his brow and froze as soon as they splattered on the deck.

After a while, even Jack started to act glum. He no longer seemed interested in serenading us or joking about doing icebreaker activities.

"And this is the *nicest* part of Niflheim," he grumbled. "You should see the cold regions!"

I'm not sure how much time passed. It seemed impossible that there had been any life before this one: breaking ice, pushing ice, shivering, dying.

Then, at the prow, Mallory croaked, "Hey! Look!"

In front of us, the swirling snow thinned. Only a few hundred yards ahead, jutting from the main line of cliffs, was a jagged peninsula like the blade of a corroded ax. A thin line of black-gravel beach hugged the base. And toward the top of the cliff...were those fires flickering?

We turned the ship in that direction, but we didn't make it far. The ice thickened, cementing our hull in place. Above Hearth's head, the kenaz rune guttered weakly. We all gathered on the deck, solemn and silent. Every blanket and extra piece of clothing in the hold had been wrapped around us.

“W-walk for it,” Blitz suggested. Even he was starting to stutter. “We pair up for warmth. G-get across the ice to the shore. Maybe we find shelter.”

It wasn’t so much a “survival plan” as a plan for dying in a different place, but we grimly went to work. We shouldered all the supplies we couldn’t live without—some food, water, the canteen of Kvasir’s Mead, our weapons. Then we climbed onto the ice and I folded the *Big Banana* into a handkerchief, because dragging the ship along behind us would’ve been, well, a drag.

Jack volunteered to float in front of us and test the ice with his blade. I wasn’t sure whether that would make things more or less dangerous for us, but he refused to go back into pendant form, because the aftereffects of his extra exertion would’ve killed me. (He’s thoughtful that way.)

As we paired up, somebody’s arm curled around my waist. Alex Fierro wedged herself next to me, wrapping a blanket around our heads and shoulders. I looked at her in amazement. A pink wool scarf covered her head and mouth, so all I could see were her two-toned eyes and some wisps of green hair.

“Sh-shut up,” she stammered. “You’re w-warm and s-summy.”

Jack led the way across the ice. Behind him, Blitzen did his best to prop up Hearthstone, who stumbled along with the rune of kenaz above him, though its heat was now more like a candle’s than a bonfire’s.

Sam and Mallory followed, then T.J. and Halfborn, and finally Alex and me. We trudged across the frozen sea, making our way toward that outcropping of rock, but our destination seemed to get farther away with every step. Could the cliff be a mirage? Maybe distance was fluid on the borders of Niflheim and Jotunheim. Once, in the hall of Utgard-Loki, Alex and I had rolled a bowling ball all the way to the White Mountains in New Hampshire, so I supposed anything was possible.

I couldn’t feel my face anymore. My feet had turned to one-gallon boxes of squishy ice cream. I thought how sad it would be to come as far as we had, facing so many gods, giants, and monsters, only to keel over and freeze to death in the middle of nowhere.

I clung to Alex. She clung to me. Her breath rattled. I wished she still had her walrus blubber, because she was all skin and bone, as wiry as her garrote. I wanted to chide her, *Eat, eat! You’re wasting away.*

I appreciated her warmth, though. Under any other circumstances, she would've killed me for getting this close. Also, I would've freaked out from so much physical contact. I considered it a personal triumph that I'd learned to hug my friends once in a while, but I wasn't usually good with closeness. The need for warmth, and maybe the fact that this was Alex, made it okay somehow. I concentrated on her scent, a sort of citrusy fragrance that made me think of orange groves in a sunny valley in Mexico—not that I'd ever been to a place like that, but it smelled nice.

"Guava juice," Alex croaked.

"Wh-what?" I asked.

"Roof d-deck. B-back B-bay. That was nice."

*She's clinging to good memories, I realized. Trying to stay alive.*

"Y-yeah," I agreed.

"York," she said. "Mr. Ch-chippy. You d-didn't know what *t-takeaway* meant."

"I hate you," I said. "Keep *t-talking*."

Her laugh sounded more like a smoker's cough. "Wh-when you returned from Alfheim. The look—the look on your f-face when I t-took b-back m-my pink glasses."

"B-but you *were* glad to see me?"

"Eh. Y-you have some entertainment v-value."

Struggling to walk on the ice, our heads so close together, I could almost imagine Alex and I were a clay warrior with two faces, a twin being. The thought was comforting.

Maybe fifty yards from the cliff, the kenaz rune sputtered out. Hearth stumbled against Blitz. The temperature plummeted further, which I didn't think was possible. My lungs expelled their last bit of warmth. They screamed when I tried to inhale.

"Keep going!" Blitz yelled back to us hoarsely. "I am *not* dying in this outfit!"

We obliged, marching step by step toward the narrow gravel beach, where at least we could die on solid ground.

Blitz and Hearth were almost at the shore when Alex stopped abruptly.

I didn't have any energy left either, but I thought I should try to sound encouraging. "We—we have to k-keep going." I looked over. We were nose-to-nose under the blankets. Her eyes glinted, amber and brown. Her scarf had dipped below her chin. Her breath was like limes.

Then, before I even knew what was happening, she kissed me. She could have bitten off my mouth and I would have been less surprised. Her lips were cracked and rough from the cold. Her nose fit perfectly next to mine. Our faces aligned, our breath mixed. Then she pulled away.

“I wasn’t going to die without doing that,” she said.

The world of primordial ice must not have frozen me completely, because my chest burned like a coal furnace.

“Well?” She frowned. “Stop gaping and let’s move.”

We trudged toward the shore. My mind wasn’t working properly. I wondered if Alex had kissed me just to inspire me to keep going, or to distract me from our imminent deaths. It didn’t seem possible she’d actually *wanted* to kiss me. Whatever the case, that kiss was the only reason I made it to shore.

Our friends were already there, huddled against the rocks. They hadn’t seemed to notice the kiss between Alex and me. Why would they? Everyone was too busy freezing to death.

“I—I have g-gunpowder,” T.J. stuttered. “C-could make a f-fire?”

Unfortunately, we had nothing to burn except our clothes, and we needed those.

Blitz looked miserably at the cliff face, which was sheer and unforgiving.

“I—I’ll try to shape the rock,” he said. “Maybe I can dig us a cave.”

I’d seen Blitz mold solid rock before, but it took a lot of energy and concentration. Even then, he’d only been making simple handholds. I didn’t see how he’d have the strength to dig an entire cave. Nor was that going to save us. But I appreciated his stubborn optimism.

He’d just dug his fingers into the stone when the entire cliff rumbled. A line of blazing light etched the shape of a door, twenty feet square, that swung inward with a deep grinding noise.

In the opening stood a giantess as terrible and beautiful as the Niflheim landscape. She was ten feet tall, dressed in white and gray furs, her brown eyes cold and angry, her dark hair braided in multiple strands like a cat-o'-nine-tails whip.

“Who *dares* rock-shape my front door?” she asked.

Blitz gulped. “Uh, I—”

“Why should I not kill you all?” the giantess demanded. “Or perhaps, since you look half-dead already, I’ll just close my door and let you freeze!”

“W-wait!” I croaked. “Sk-skadi... You’re Skadi, right?”

*Gods of Asgard, I thought, please let this be Skadi and not some random giantess named Gertrude the Unfriendly.*

“I—I’m M-magnus Chase,” I continued. “Njord is my grandfather. H-he sent me to f-find you.”

A variety of emotions rippled across Skadi’s face: irritation, resentment, and maybe just a hint of curiosity.

“All right, frozen boy,” she growled. “That gets you in the door. Once you’ve all thawed out and explained yourselves, I’ll decide whether or not to use you for archery targets.”



## Skadi Knows All, Shoots All

I DIDN'T WANT to let go of Alex. Or maybe I just physically couldn't.

Two of Skadi's jotun servants literally had to pull us apart. One of them carried me up a winding set of stairs into the fortress, my body still hunched in hobbling-old-man position.

Compared to outside, Skadi's hall felt like a sauna, though the thermostat probably wasn't set much higher than freezing. I was carried through high stone corridors with vaulted ceilings that reminded me of the big old churches in Back Bay (great places to warm up in when you're homeless in winter). Occasionally a booming sound echoed through the fortress, like someone was shooting cannons in the distance. Skadi barked orders to her servants, and we were all taken to separate rooms to get cleaned up.

A jotun manservant (giantservant?) lowered me into a bath so hot I hit a high note I hadn't been able to sing since fourth grade. While I soaked, he gave me something to drink—a vile herbal concoction that burned my throat and made my fingers and toes spasm. He hauled me out of the bath, and by the time he got me dressed in a white wool tunic and breeches, I had to admit I felt almost okay again, even with Jack now hanging back on my neck chain as a runestone. The color of my toes and fingers had returned to pink. I could feel my face. My nose had not fallen off from frostbite, and my lips were right where Alex had left them.

"You'll live," the jotun grumbled, like this was a personal failure on his part. He gave me comfortable fur shoes and a thick warm cloak, then led me out to the main hall, where my friends were waiting.

The hall was standard Viking for the most part: a rough-hewn stone floor covered with straw, a ceiling made from spears and shields, three tables in a U shape around a central fire, though Skadi's flames burned white and blue and seemed to give off no heat.

Along one side of the hall, a row of cathedral-size windows opened onto a blizzard-blurred vista. I saw no glass in the windows, but the wind and snow didn't trespass inside.

At the center table, Skadi sat on a throne carved from yew wood and overlaid with furs. Her servants hustled around, putting out platters of fresh bread and roasted meat, along with steaming mugs that smelled like...hot chocolate? Suddenly I liked Skadi a lot more.

My friends were all dressed like me, in white wool, so we looked like a secret society of very clean monks—the Fellowship of the Bleach. I'll admit I scanned for Alex first, hoping to sit next to her, but she was on the far bench, wedged between Mallory and Halfborn with T.J. at the end.

Alex caught me. She mimicked my gawping face like *What are you looking at?*

So, it was back to normal, then. One life-and-death kiss, and we returned to our regularly scheduled snark. Great.

I sat next to Blitzen, Hearthstone, and Sam, which was just fine.

We all dug into our dinner, except for Sam. She hadn't bathed—since that was also against Ramadan rules—but she'd changed clothes. Her hijab had shifted color to match her white outfit. Somehow, she managed not to stare longingly at everyone else's food, which convinced me beyond a doubt that she had superhuman endurance.

Skadi lounged on her throne, her cat-o'-nine-tails hair draped over her shoulders, her fur cloak making her look even larger than she was. She spun an arrow on top of her knee. Behind her, the wall was lined with racks of equipment: skis, bows, quivers of arrows. I guessed she was a fan of cross-country archery.

"Welcome, travelers," said our host, "to *Thrymheimr*—in your language, Thunder Home."

As if on cue, a rumble shook the room—the same *boom* I'd heard when deeper in the fortress. Now I knew what it was: snow thunder. You heard it in Boston sometimes when a snowstorm mixed with a thunderstorm. It sounded like firecrackers going off inside a cotton pillow, if you magnified that sound by a million.

“Thunder Home.” Halfborn nodded gravely. “A good name, considering, you know, the constant—”

Thunder boomed again, rattling the plates on the table.

Mallory leaned over to Alex. “I can’t reach Gunderson. Hit him for me, will you?”

Despite the huge size of the hall, the acoustics were perfect. I could hear every whisper. I wondered if Skadi had designed the place with that in mind.

The giantess wasn’t eating from the plate in front of her. Best-case scenario: she was fasting for Ramadan. Worst-case scenario: she was waiting until we were sufficiently fattened up so she could enjoy us as her main course.

She tapped her arrow on her knee while studying me intently.

“So, you’re one of Njord’s, eh?” she mused. “Child of Frey, I suppose.”

“Yes, uh, ma’am.” I wasn’t sure if *Lady* or *Miss* or *Huge Scary Person* was the appropriate title, but Skadi didn’t kill me, so I figured I hadn’t offended her. Yet.

“I can see the resemblance.” She wrinkled her nose, as if the similarity was not a point in my favor. “Njord wasn’t the worst husband. He was kind. He had beautiful feet.”

“Outstanding feet,” Blitz agreed, wagging a pork rib for emphasis.

“But we just couldn’t get along,” Skadi continued. “Irreconcilable differences. He didn’t like my hall. Can you believe it?”

Hearthstone signed, *You have a beautiful hall.*

The gesture for *beautiful* was circling your hand in front of your face, then spreading your fingertips apart like *poof!* The first few times I saw it, I thought Hearth was saying *This thing makes my face explode.*

“Thank you, elf,” said Skadi (because all the best jotuns understand ASL). “Certainly, Thunder Home is better than Njord’s seaside palace. All those gulls constantly screeching—I couldn’t stand the noise!”

Snow thunder shook the room again.

“Yes,” Alex said, “no peace and quiet, like here.”

“Exactly,” said Skadi. “My father built this fortress, may his soul rest with Ymir, the first giant. Now Thrymheimr is mine, and I don’t intend to leave it. I’ve had my fill of the Aesir!” She leaned forward, still holding that wicked barbed arrow. “Now tell me, Magnus Chase, why did Njord send

you to me? *Please* tell me he doesn't still harbor illusions about us getting back together."

*Why me?* I thought.

Skadi seemed okay. I'd met enough giants to know they weren't all bad, any more than all gods were good. But if Skadi was done with the Aesir, I wasn't sure she'd welcome us going after Loki, who was, of course, the Aesir's main enemy. I definitely didn't want to tell her that my grandfather, the god of seaside pedicures, still pined for her.

On the other hand, some gut instinct told me Skadi would see through any lies or omissions as easily as she heard every whisper in this hall. Thrymheimr was not a place for hiding secrets.

"Njord wanted me to see how you felt about him," I admitted.

She sighed. "I don't believe this. He didn't send you with flowers, did he? I told him to *stop* it with the bouquets."

"No flowers," I promised, suddenly sympathizing with all the innocent Niflheim delivery people she had probably shot dead. "And Njord's feelings aren't the main reason we're here. We've come to stop Loki."

The servants all stopped what they were doing. They glanced at me, then at their mistress, as if thinking *Well, this should be interesting.* My friends watched me with expressions that ranged from *You got this!* (Blitzen) to *Please don't screw up as much as usual* (Alex).

Skadi's dark eyes glittered. "Go on."

"Loki is getting his ship *Naglfar* ready to sail," I said. "We're here to stop him, recapture him, and bring him back to the Aesir so we'd don't have to fight Ragnarok, like, tomorrow."

Another peal of thunder shook the mountain.

The giantess's face was impossible to read. I imagined her sending her arrow across the room and embedding it in my chest like a mistletoe dart.

Instead, she threw back her head and laughed. "Is *that* why you're carrying Kvasir's Mead? You intend to challenge Loki to a flyting?"

I gulped. "Uh...yeah. How do you know we have Kvasir's Mead?"

My second, unspoken, question was: *And are you going to take it away from us?*

The giantess leaned forward. "I am fully aware of everything that happens in my hall, Magnus Chase, and everyone who passes through it. I have taken inventory of your weapons, your supplies, your powers, your scars." She scanned the room, her eyes resting on each of us—not with

sympathy, more like she was picking targets. “I also would have known if you’d lied to me. Be glad you did not. So, tell me: Why should I let you continue your quest? Persuade me not to kill you.”

Halfborn Gunderson wiped his beard. “Well, for one thing, Lady Skadi, killing us would be a lot of trouble. If you know our abilities, you know we’re excellent fighters. We’d give you quite a challenge—”

An arrow thudded into the table an inch from Halfborn’s hand. I didn’t even see how it happened. I looked back at Skadi—she suddenly had a bow in her hand, a second arrow already nocked and ready to fly.

Halfborn didn’t flinch. He set down his hot chocolate and belched. “Lucky shot.”

“Ha!” Skadi lowered her bow, and my heart started pumping blood again. “So you have bravery. Or foolhardiness, at least. What else can you tell me?”

“That we’re no friends of Loki’s,” Samirah volunteered. “And neither are you.”

Skadi raised an eyebrow. “What makes you say so?”

“If you were a friend of Loki’s, we would already be dead.” Sam gestured toward the windows. “The Harbor of *Naglfar* is close, isn’t it? I can sense my father nearby. You don’t like Loki gathering his army right on your doorstep. Let us continue our quest, and we can take my father off the board.”

Alex nodded. “Yes, we can.”

“Interesting,” Skadi mused. “Two children of Loki sit at my dinner table, and you both seem to hate Loki even more than I do. Ragnarok makes strange allies.”

T.J. clapped once, so loudly we all flinched (except for Hearth). “I knew it!” He grinned and pointed at Skadi. “I knew this lady had good taste. Hot chocolate this tasty? A hall this awesome? And her servants don’t wear thrall collars!”

Skadi curled her lip. “No, einherji. I detest the keeping of slaves.”

“See?” T.J. gave Halfborn a *told-you-so* look. More thunder rattled the plates and cups, as if agreeing with T.J. The berserker just rolled his eyes.

“I knew this lady hated Loki,” T.J. summed up. “She’s a natural Union supporter!”

The giantess frowned. “I am not sure what that means, my very enthusiastic guest, but you are right: I am no friend of Loki’s. There was a

time when he didn't seem so bad. He could make me laugh. He was charming. Then, during the flying in Aegir's hall...Loki insinuated that—that he had shared my bed."

Skadi shuddered at the memory. "In front of all the other gods, he slighted my honor. He said *horrible* things. And so, when the gods bound him in that cave, I was the one who found the serpent and set it over Loki's head." She smiled coldly. "The Aesir and Vanir were satisfied just to bind him for eternity, but that wasn't enough for me. I wanted him to experience the drip, drip, drip of poison in his face for the rest of time, just the way his words had made *me* feel."

I decided I would not be slighting Skadi's honor anytime soon.

"Well, ma'am..." Blitz tugged at his wool tunic. He was the only one of us who didn't look comfortable in his new threads, probably because the outfit did not allow him to wear an ascot. "Sounds like you gave the villain just what he deserved. Will you help us, then?"

Skadi set her bow across the table. "Let me understand this: you, Magnus Chase, plan to defeat Loki, the silver-tongued master of insults, in a verbal duel."

"Right."

She looked like she was waiting for me to wax poetic about my prowess with verbs and adjectives and whatnot. Honestly, that one-word answer was all I could manage.

"Well, then," Skadi said, "it's a very good thing you have Kvasir's Mead."

My friends all nodded. Thanks a lot, friends.

"You were also wise not to drink it yet," Skadi continued. "You have such a small amount, there is no telling how long its effect will last. You should drink it in the morning, just before you leave. That should allow enough time for the mead to take effect before you face Loki."

"Then you know where he is?" I asked. "He's *that* close?"

I wasn't sure whether to be relieved or petrified.

Skadi nodded. "Beyond my mountain there lies a frozen bay where *Naglfar* sits at her moorings. In giant terms, it is only a few good strides away."

"What is that in human terms?" asked Mallory.

"It won't matter," Skadi assured her. "I will give you skis to speed you on your way."

Hearth signed, *Skis*?

“I’m not so good on skis,” Blitz muttered.

Skadi smiled. “Fear not, Blitzen, son of Freya. My skis will look good on you. You will have to reach the ship before midday tomorrow. By then, the ice blocking the bay will be sufficiently melted for Loki to sail into open waters. If that happens, nothing will be able to stop Ragnarok.”

I met Mallory’s eyes across the hearth fire. Her mom, Frigg, had been right. By the time we set foot on *Naglfar*, if we reached it, forty-eight hours would have passed since Fläm.

“If you manage to board the ship,” Skadi said, “you will somehow have to make your way through legions of giants and undead. They will, of course, try to kill you. But if you succeed in getting face-to-face with Loki and issuing your challenge, he will be honor-bound to accept. The fighting will stop long enough for the flyting.”

“So,” Alex said, “it’ll be cake, then.”

Skadi’s cat-o’-nine-tails hair slithered across her shoulders as she regarded Alex. “You have an interesting definition of *cake*. Assuming Magnus somehow defeats Loki in a flyting, and weakens him enough to capture...how will you imprison him?”

“Um,” Mallory said. “We have a walnut shell.”

Skadi nodded. “That is good. A walnut shell might do it.”

“So, if I defeat Loki in the flyting,” I said, “and we do the walnut shell, et cetera...then we shake hands with Loki’s crew, everybody says ‘good game,’ and they let us go, right?”

Skadi snorted. “Hardly. The cease-fire will end as soon as the contest is over. Then, one way or another, the crew will kill you.”

“Well, then,” Halfborn said. “Why don’t you come with us, Skadi? We could use an archer in our group.”

Skadi laughed. “This one amuses me.”

“Yeah, that feeling wears off quickly,” Mallory muttered.

The giantess rose. “Tonight you will stay in my hall, little mortals. You can sleep peacefully knowing that there is nothing to fear in Thunder Home. But in the morning”—she pointed to the white abyss beyond her windows—“out you go. The last thing I want is to get Njord’s hopes up by pampering his grandson.”



## I Become as Poetic as . . . Like, a Poetic Person

**DESPITE SKADI'S PROMISE,** I didn't sleep peacefully.

The coldness of the chamber and the constant booming didn't help. Nor did the knowledge that in the morning Skadi was apparently going to fit us with skis and throw us out a window.

Also, I kept thinking about Alex Fierro. You know, maybe just a little. Alex was a force of nature, like the snow thunder. She struck when she felt like it, depending on temperature differentials and storm patterns I couldn't possibly predict. She shook my foundations in a way that was powerful but also weirdly soft and constrained, veiled in blizzard. I couldn't assign any motives to her. She just did what she wanted. At least, that's how it felt to me.

I stared at the ceiling for a long time. Finally, I got out of bed, used the washbasin, and changed into new wool clothes—white and gray, the colors of snow and ice. My runestone pendant hung cold and heavy on my neck, like Jack was catching some winks. I gathered my few supplies, then wandered into the corridors of Thunder Home, hoping I didn't get killed by a startled servant or a random arrow.

In the great hall, I found Sam at prayer. Jack hummed against my collarbone, informing me in a sleepy, irritated tone that it was four in the morning, Niflheim Standard Time.

Sam had laid her prayer rug facing the huge open windows. I guessed the blur of white outside made a good blank screen to stare at while you meditated on God or whatever. I waited until she finished. I'd come to recognize her routine by now. A moment of silence at the end—a sort of

peaceful settling that even the thunder couldn't disturb—then she turned and smiled.

"Good morning," she said.

"Hey. You're up early."

I realized that was a stupid thing to say to a Muslim. If you're observant, you never sleep late, because you have to be up for prayers before first light. Being around Sam, I'd started to pay more attention to the timing of dawn and dusk, even when we were in other worlds.

"I didn't sleep much," she said. "I figured I would get in a good meal or two." She patted her stomach.

"How do you know prayer times in Jotunheim?" I asked. "Or where Mecca is?"

"Heh. I take my best guess. That's allowed. It's the intention that counts."

I wondered if the same would be true of my coming challenge. Maybe Loki would say, *Well, Magnus, you really sucked at flyting, but you did your best and it's the intention that counts, so you win!*

"Hey." Sam's voice jarred me out of my thoughts. "You'll do fine."

"You're awfully calm," I noted. "Considering...you know, today's the day."

Sam adjusted her hijab, which was still white to match her outfit. "Last night was the twenty-seventh night of Ramadan. Traditionally, that's the Night of Power."

I waited. "Is that when you get supercharged?"

She laughed. "Sort of. It commemorates Muhammad receiving his first revelation from the angel Gabriel. Nobody knows exactly which night it is, but it's the holiest of the year—"

"Wait, it's your holiest night, and you don't know when it is?"

Sam shrugged. "Most people go with the twenty-seventh, but yeah. It's one of the nights of the last ten days of Ramadan. Not knowing keeps you on your toes. Anyway, last night it just *felt* right. I stayed up praying and thinking, and I just felt...confirmed. Like there *is* something bigger than all this: Loki, Ragnarok, the Ship of the Dead. My dad may have power over me because he's my dad. But he's not the biggest power. *Allahu akbar.*"

I knew that term, but I'd never heard Sam use it before. I'll admit it gave me an instinctive jolt in the gut. The news media loved to talk about

how terrorists would say that right before they did something horrible and blew people up.

I wasn't going to mention that to Sam. I imagined she was painfully aware. She couldn't walk the streets of Boston in her hijab most days without somebody screaming at her to go home, and (if she was in a bad mood) she'd scream back, "I'm from Dorchester!"

"Yeah," I said. "That means *God is great*, right?"

Sam shook her head. "That's a slightly inaccurate translation. It means God is *greater*."

"Than what?"

"Everything. The whole point of saying it is to remind yourself that God is greater than whatever you are facing—your fears, your problems, your thirst, your hunger, your anger. Even your issues with a parent like Loki." She shook her head. "Sorry, that must sound really hokey to an atheist."

I shrugged, feeling awkward. I wished I could have Sam's level of faith. I didn't, but it clearly worked for her, and I needed her to be confident, especially today. "Well, you sound supercharged. That's what counts. Ready to kick some undead butt?"

"Yep." She smirked. "What about you? Are you ready to face *Alex*?"

I wondered if God was greater than the punch in the stomach Sam had just given me. "Um, what do you mean?"

"Oh, Magnus," she said. "You are so emotionally nearsighted it's almost cute."

Before I could think of some clever way not to respond to that—perhaps by shouting *Look over there!* and running away—Skadi's voice boomed through the hall. "There are my early risers!"

The giantess was dressed in enough white fur to outfit a family of polar bears. Behind her, a line of servants trudged in carrying an assortment of wooden skis. "Let's rouse your friends and get you on your way!"

Our friends were not thrilled about getting up.

I had to pour ice water on Halfborn Gunderson's head *twice*. Blitz grumbled something about ducks and told me to go away. When I tried to shake Hearth awake, he stuck one hand above the covers and signed, *I am not here*. T.J. bolted out of bed screaming, "CHARGE!" Fortunately he wasn't armed, or he would've run me through.

Finally, everybody assembled in the main hall, where Skadi's servants set out our last meal—sorry, our *breakfast*—of bread, cheese, and apple cider.

"This cider was made from the apples of immortality," Skadi said. "Centuries ago, when my father kidnapped the goddess Idun, we fermented some of her apples into cider. It's quite diluted. It won't make you immortal, but it will give you a boost of endurance, at least long enough to get through the wilds of Niflheim."

I drained the cup. The cider didn't make me feel particularly boosted, but it did tingle a little. It settled the crackling and popping in my stomach.

After eating, we tried on our skis with varying degrees of success. Hearthstone waddled around gracefully in his (who knew elves could waddle gracefully?), while Blitz tried in vain to find a pair that matched his shoes. "Do you have anything smaller?" he asked. "Also, maybe in a dark brown? Like a mahogany?"

Skadi patted him on the head, which wasn't something dwarves appreciated.

Mallory and Halfborn shuffled around with ease, but both of them had to help T.J. stay on his feet.

"Jefferson, I thought you grew up in New England," Halfborn said. "You never skied?"

"I lived in a city," T.J. grumbled. "Also, I'm Black. There weren't a lot of Black guys skiing down the Boston waterfront in 1861."

Sam looked a little awkward on her skis, but since she could fly, I wasn't too worried about her.

As for Alex, she sat by an open window putting on a pair of hot-pink ski boots. Had she brought them with her? Had she tipped a servant a few kroner to find her a pair in Skadi's supply closet? I had no idea, but she wouldn't be skiing off to her death in bland white and gray. She wore a green fur cloak—Skadi must have skinned a few Grinches to make it—over her mauve jeans and green-and-pink sweater vest. To top off the look, she wore an Amelia Earhart-style aviator's cap with her pink sunglasses. Just when I thought I'd seen all the outfits nobody but Alex could pull off, she pulled off a new one.

As she adjusted her skis, she paid no attention to the rest of us. (And by *the rest of us*, I mean me.) She seemed lost in her thoughts, maybe

considering what she would say to her mother, Loki, before she attempted to garrote his head off.

At last we were all in skis, standing in pairs next to the open windows like a group of Olympic jumpers.

“Well, Magnus Chase,” Skadi said, “all that remains is the drinking of the mead.”

Sam, standing on my left, offered me the canteen.

“Oh.” I wondered if it was safe to drink mead before operating skis. Maybe the laws were more lax out here in the hinterlands. “You mean now?”

“Yes,” Skadi said. “Now.”

I uncapped the canteen. This was the moment of truth. We’d ventured across worlds and nearly died countless times. We’d feasted with Aegir, battled pottery with pottery, slain a dragon, and siphoned mead with an old rubber hose just so I could drink this honeyed blood beverage, which would hopefully make me poetic enough to talk smack about Loki.

I saw no point in doing a taste test. I chugged down the mead in three big gulps. I was expecting the taste of blood, but Kvasir’s Mead tasted more like...well, mead. It certainly didn’t burn like dragon’s blood, or even tingle like Skadi’s cider of not-quite-immortality.

“How do you feel?” Blitz asked hopefully. “Poetic?”

I burped. “I feel okay.”

“That’s it?” Alex demanded. “Say something impressive. Describe the storm.”

I gazed out the windows into the blizzard. “The storm looks...white. Also cold.”

Halfborn sighed. “We’re all dead.”

“Good luck, heroes!” Skadi called.

Then her servants pushed us out the windows into the void.

## I Get a Collect Call from Hel

WE HURTLED through the sky like things that hurtle through the sky.

The wind whipped my face. The snow blinded me. The cold was so bad it made me cold.

Okay, yeah, the mead of poetry *definitely* wasn't working.

Then gravity took hold. I hated gravity.

My skis scraped and hissed against packed snow. I hadn't been skiing in a *long* time. I'd never done it careening down a forty-five-degree slope in subzero temperatures and blizzard conditions.

My eyeballs froze. The cold seared my cheeks. Somehow, I avoided a wipeout. Each time I started to wobble, my skis autocorrected, keeping me upright.

Off to my right, I caught a glimpse of Sam flying along, her skis six feet above the ground. Cheater. Hearthstone zipped past on my left, signing, *On your left*, which was not very helpful.

In front of me, Blitzen fell out of the sky, screaming at the top of his lungs. He hit the snow and immediately executed a series of dazzling slaloms, figure eights, and triple flips. Either he was a *much* better skier than he'd let on, or his magical skis had an evil sense of humor.

My knees and ankles burned with strain. The wind ripped straight through my superheavy giant-weave clothes. I figured any minute I would stumble more than my magical skis could compensate for. I'd hit a boulder, break my neck, and end up sprawled across the snow like...Forget it. I'm not even trying that one.

Suddenly the slope evened out. The blizzard abated. Our speed decreased, and all eight of us slid to a gentle stop like we'd just finished the bunny slope at Mount Easy McWeakSauce.

(Hey, that was a simile! Maybe my usual just-average skill with description was coming back!)

Our skis popped off of their own accord. Alex was the first one back in motion. She ran ahead and took cover behind a low stone ridge that cut across the snow. I suppose that made sense, since she was the most colorful target within five square miles. The rest of us joined her. Our riderless skis turned around and zipped back up the mountain.

"So much for an exit strategy." Alex looked at me for the first time since last night. "You'd better start feeling poetic soon, Chase. 'Cause you're out of time."

I peeked over the ridge and saw what she meant. A few hundred yards away, through a thin veil of sleet, aluminum-gray water stretched to the horizon. At the near shore, rising from the icy bay, was the dark shape of *Naglfar*, the Ship of the Dead. It was so huge that if I hadn't known it was a sailing vessel, I might have thought it was another promontory like Skadi's mountain fortress. Its mainsail would've taken several days to climb. Its massive hull must have displaced enough water to fill the Grand Canyon. The deck and gangplanks swarmed with what looked like angry ants, though I had a feeling that if we were closer, those shapes would have resolved into giants and zombies—thousands upon thousands of them.

Before, I'd only seen the ship in dreams. Now, I realized how desperate our situation was: eight people facing an army designed to destroy worlds, and our hopes hinged on me finding Loki and calling him some bad names.

The absurdity of it might have made me feel hopeless. Instead, it made me angry.

I didn't feel poetic, exactly, but I *did* feel a burning in my throat—the desire to tell Loki exactly what I thought of him. Some choice colorful metaphors sprang to mind.

"I'm ready," I said, hoping I was right. "How do we find Loki without getting killed?"

"Frontal charge?" T.J. suggested.

"Uh—"

"I'm *kidding*," T.J. said. "Clearly, this calls for diversionary tactics. Most of us should find a way to the front of the vessel and attack. We cause

a disturbance, draw as many of those baddies as we can away from the gangplanks, give Magnus a chance to get aboard and challenge Loki.”

“Wait a second—”

“I agree with Union Boy,” said Mallory.

“Yep.” Halfborn hefted his battle-ax. “Battle-Ax is thirsty for jotun blood!”

“Hold on!” I said. “That’s suicide.”

“Nah,” Blitz said. “Kid, we’ve been talking about this, and we’ve got a plan. I brought some dwarven ropes. Mallory’s got grappling hooks. Hearth’s got his runestones. With luck, we can scale the prow of that ship and start making chaos.”

He patted one of the supply bags he’d carried from the *Big Banana*. “Don’t worry, I’ve got some surprises in store for those undead warriors. You sneak up the aft gangway, find Loki, and demand a duel. Then the fighting should stop. We’ll be fine.”

“Yeah,” Halfborn said. “Then we’ll come watch you beat that meinfretr at insults.”

“And I’ll throw a walnut at him,” Mallory finished. “Give us thirty minutes or so to get in position. Sam, Alex—take good care of our boy.”

“We will,” Sam said.

Even Alex did not complain. I realized I’d been completely outmaneuvered. My friends had united on a plan to maximize my chances, regardless of how dangerous it might be for them.

“Guys—”

Hearth signed, *Time is wasting. Here. For you.*

From his pouch, he handed me othala—the same runestone we’d taken from Andiron’s cairn. Lying in my palm, it brought back the smell of rotting reptile flesh and burnt brownies.

“Thanks,” I said, “but...why this particular rune?”

*Does not just mean inheritance,* Hearth signed. *Othala symbolizes aid on a journey. Use it once we are gone. It should protect you.*

“How?”

He shrugged. *Don’t ask me. I’m just the sorcerer.*

“All right, then,” T.J. said. “Alex, Sam, Magnus—we’ll see you on that ship.”

Before I could object, or even thank them, the rest of the group trundled off through the snow. In their jotunish white clothes, they quickly

disappeared into the terrain.

I turned to Alex and Sam. “How long have you all been planning this?”

Despite her cracked and bleeding lips, Alex grinned. “About as long as you’ve been clueless. So, a while.”

“We should get going,” Sam said. “Shall we try your rune?”

I looked down at othala. I wondered if there was some connection between inheritance and aid on a journey. I couldn’t think of any. I didn’t like where this rune came from or what it stood for, but I supposed it made sense that I’d have to use it. We’d earned it with a lot of pain and suffering, the same way we’d earned the mead.

“Do I just throw it in the air?” I wondered.

“I imagine Hearth would say...” Alex continued in sign language: *Yes, you idiot.*

I was pretty sure that wasn’t what Hearth would say.

I tossed the rune. The othala dissolved in a wisp of snow. I hoped it would reappear in Hearth’s rune bag after a day or two, the way runes usually did after he used them. I definitely didn’t want to buy him a replacement.

“Nothing happened,” I noted. Then I glanced to either side of me. Alex and Sam had disappeared. “Oh, gods, I vaporized you!” I tried to stand up, but unseen hands grabbed me from either side and dragged me back down.

“I’m right here,” Alex said. “Sam?”

“Here,” Sam confirmed. “It seems the rune made us invisible. I can see myself, but not you guys.”

I glanced down. Sam was right. I could see myself just fine, but the only sign of my two friends was their impressions where they sat in the snow.

I wondered why othala had chosen invisibility. Was it drawing on my personal experience, feeling invisible when I was homeless? Or maybe the magic was shaped by Hearthstone’s family experience. I imagined he’d wished he were invisible to his father for most of his childhood. Whatever the case, I didn’t intend to waste this chance.

“Let’s get moving,” I said.

“Hold hands,” Alex ordered.

She took my left hand with no particular affection, as if I were a walking stick. Sam did not take my other hand, but I suspected it wasn’t for religious reasons. She just liked the idea of Alex and me holding hands. I could almost *hear* Sam smiling.

“Okay,” she said, “let’s go.”

We trudged along the stone ridge, heading for the shore. I worried about leaving a trail of footprints, but the snow and wind quickly blew away all traces of our passage.

The temperature and wind were as bitter as the day before, but Skadi’s apple cider must have been working. My breathing didn’t feel like I was inhaling glass. I didn’t have the need to check my face every few seconds to make sure my nose hadn’t fallen off.

Over the howl of the wind and the boom of glaciers calving into the bay, other sounds reached us from the deck of *Naglfar*—chains clanking, beams creaking, giants barking orders, and the boots of last-minute arrivals tromping across the fingernail deck. The ship must have been very close to sailing.

We were about a hundred yards from the dock when Alex yanked on my hand. “Down, you idiot!”

I dropped in place, though I didn’t see how we could hide much better than being invisible.

Emerging from the wind and snow, passing within ten feet of us, a troop of ghoulish soldiers marched toward *Naglfar*. I hadn’t seen them coming, and Alex was right: I didn’t want to trust that invisibility would keep me hidden from these guys.

Their tattered leather armor was glazed with ice. Their bodies were nothing but desiccated bits of flesh clinging to bones. Blue spectral light flickered inside their rib cages and skulls, making me think of birthday candles parading across the worst birthday cake ever.

As the undead tromped past, I noticed that the soles of their boots were studded with nails, like cleats. I remembered something Halfborn Gunderson had once told me: because the road to Helheim was icy, the dishonored dead were buried with nailed shoes to keep them from slipping along the way. Now those boots were marching their owners back to the world of the living.

Alex’s hand shivered in mine. Or maybe I was the one shivering. At last the dead passed us, heading for the docks and the Ship of the Dead.

I got unsteadily to my feet.

“Allah defend us,” Sam muttered.

I desperately hoped that if the Big Guy was real, Sam had some pull with him. We were going to need defending.

“Our friends are facing *that*,” Alex said. “We’ve got to hurry.”

She was right again. The only thing that would make me want to go aboard a ship filled with thousands of those zombies was knowing that if we didn’t, our friends would fight them alone. That wasn’t going to happen.

I stepped into the tracks left by the dead army, and immediately, whispering voices filled my head: *Magnus. Magnus.*

Pain spiked my eyes. My knees buckled. I knew these voices. Some were harsh and angry, others kind and gentle. All of them echoed in my mind, demanding attention. One of them...One voice was my mother’s.

I staggered.

“Hey,” Alex hissed. “What are you—? Wait, what is that?”

Did she hear the voices, too? I turned, trying to pinpoint their source. I hadn’t seen it before, but about fifty feet away, in the direction from which the zombies had come, a dark square hole had appeared in the snow—a ramp leading down into nothingness.

*Magnus*, whispered Uncle Randolph’s voice. *I’m so sorry, my boy. Can you ever forgive me? Come down. Let me see you once more.*

*Magnus*, said a voice I’d only heard in dreams: Caroline, Randolph’s wife. *Please forgive him. His heart was in the right place. Come, darling. I want to meet you.*

*Are you our cousin?* said the voice of a little girl—Emma, Randolph’s older daughter. *My daddy gave me an othala rune, too. Would you like to see it?*

Most painful of all, my mom called *Come on, Magnus!* in the cheerful tone she used to use when she was encouraging me to hurry up the trail so she could share an amazing vista with me. Except now there was a coldness to her voice, as if her lungs were filled with Freon. *Hurry!*

The voices tore at me, taking little pieces of my mind. Was I sixteen? Was I twelve or ten? Was I in Niflheim or the Blue Hills or on Uncle Randolph’s boat?

Alex’s hand dropped from mine. I didn’t care.

I stepped toward the cave.

Somewhere behind me, Sam said, “Guys?”

She sounded concerned, on the edge of panic, but her voice didn’t seem any more real to me than the whispering spirits’. She couldn’t stop me. She couldn’t see my footprints on the trampled path left by the zombie soldiers.

If I ran, I could make it down that icy road and plunge into Helheim before my friends knew what had happened. The thought thrilled me.

My family was down there. Hel, the goddess of the dishonored dead, had told me as much when I'd met her on Bunker Hill. She'd promised I could join them. Maybe they needed my help.

Jack pulsed warmly against my throat. Why was he doing that?

Off to my left, Alex muttered, "No. No, I won't listen."

"Alex!" Sam said. "Thank God. Where's Magnus?"

Why did Sam sound so concerned? I had a vague recollection that we were in Niflheim for a reason. I—I probably shouldn't be diving into Helheim right now. That would probably kill me.

The whispering voices got louder, more insistent.

My mind fought against them. I resisted the urge to run toward that dark ramp.

I was invisible because of the othala rune—the rune of inheritance.

What if this was the downside of its magic? It was allowing me to hear the voices of my dead, pulling me into their realm.

Alex found my hand again. "Got him."

I fought down a surge of irritation. "Why?" I croaked.

"I know," Alex said, her voice surprisingly gentle. "I hear them, too. But you can't follow them."

Slowly the dark ramp closed. The voices stopped. The wind and snow began to erase the tracks of the zombies.

"You guys okay?" Sam called, her voice an octave higher than usual.

"Yeah," I said, not feeling very okay. "I—I'm sorry about that."

"Don't be." Alex squeezed my fingers. "I heard my grandfather. I'd almost forgotten what he sounded like. And other voices. Adrian..." She choked on the name.

I almost didn't dare ask. "Who?"

"A friend," she said, loading the word with all sorts of possible meanings. "Committed suicide."

Her hand went limp in mine, but I didn't let her go. I was tempted to reach out with my power, to try to heal her, to share the backwash of pain and memories that would flood my head from Alex's past. But I didn't. I hadn't been invited there.

Sam was silent for a count of ten. "Alex, I'm so sorry. I—I didn't hear anything."

“Be glad,” I said.

“Yeah,” Alex agreed.

Part of me was still resisting the urge to run across the snow, fling myself down, and claw at the ground until the tunnel reopened. I’d heard my mother. Even if it was just a cold echo. Or a trick. A cruel joke from Hel.

I turned toward the sea. Suddenly I was more afraid of staying on solid ground than I was of boarding the Ship of the Dead.

“Let’s go,” I said. “Our friends are counting on us.”

## I Call a Time-Out

**THE GANGPLANK** was made of toenails.

If that isn't enough to gross you out, then no amount of Kvasir's Mead will help me give you a sufficiently disgusting description. Though the ramp was fifty feet wide, it had so much traffic we had trouble finding an opening. We timed our ascent to follow a troop of zombies aboard, but I almost got stepped on by a giant carrying a stack of spears.

Once at the top, we ducked to one side, pressing ourselves against the railing.

In person, the ship was even more horrible than in my dreams. The deck seemed to stretch out forever—a glistening patchwork of yellow, black, and gray nail plates, like the hide of some armored prehistoric creature. Hundreds of giants bustled about, looking almost human-size in comparison with the vessel: stone giants, mountain giants, frost giants, hill giants, and a few nattily dressed fellows who might have been metropolitan giants, all coiling ropes, stacking weapons, and shouting at each other in a variety of jotun dialects.

The undead were not so industrious. Taking up most of the vast deck, they stood at attention in ranks of ghostly white and blue, tens of thousands, like they were waiting for a parade review. Some were mounted on zombie horses. Others had zombie dogs or wolves at their side. A few even had zombie birds of prey perched on their skeletal arms. They all seemed perfectly content to stand in silence until further orders. Many of them had waited centuries for this final battle. I supposed they figured a little longer wouldn't hurt.

The giants did their best to avoid the undead. They stepped gingerly around the legions, cursing them for being in the way, but didn't touch them or threaten them directly. I imagined I might feel the same way if I found myself sharing a ship with a horde of strangely well-behaved, heavily armed rodents.

I scanned the deck for Loki. I spotted nobody in a bright white admiral's uniform, but that meant nothing. In those vast crowds, he could have been anywhere, disguised as anyone. Or he could have been belowdecks, having a leisurely pre-Ragnarok breakfast. So much for my plan of walking right up to him unopposed and saying *Hi. I challenge you to a duel of name-calling, Stupid Head.*

On the foredeck, maybe half a mile away, a giant paced back and forth, waving an ax and shouting orders. He was too far off for me to make out many details, but from my dreams I recognized his hunched, gaunt form and his elaborate rib-cage shield. He was Hrym, captain of the vessel. His voice carried over the din of crashing waves and growling jotuns:

“MAKE READY, YOU COW-FOOTED COWARDS! THE PASSAGE IS CLEAR! IF YOU DON’T MOVE FASTER, I’LL FEED YOU TO GARM!”

Then, somewhere behind the captain, toward the prow, an explosion shook the boat. Screaming, smoking giants tumbled through the air like acrobats shot from cannons.

“WE’RE UNDER ATTACK!” someone yelled. “GET THEM!”

Our friends had arrived.

I couldn't see them, but over the din of confusion, I heard the brassy tones of a reveille from a bugle. I could only assume T.J. had found the instrument under his firing caps, marksman's glasses, and hardtack.

Above Captain Hrym, a golden rune blazed in the sky:



*Thurisaz*, the sign for destruction, but also the symbol of the god Thor. Hearthstone couldn't have picked a better rune to strike fear and confusion into a bunch of giants. Lightning bolts blasted from the rune in every direction, frying giants and undead alike.

More giants swarmed the upper deck. Not that they had much choice. The ship was so packed with troops that the crowds pushed the front lines forward whether they wanted to go or not. An avalanche of bodies choked ramps and stairways. A mob overtook Captain Hrym and carried him along as he waved his ax above his head and yelled to no effect.

The undead legions mostly stayed in their ranks, but even they turned their heads toward the chaos, as if mildly curious.

Next to me, Sam muttered, “Now or never.”

Alex let go of my hand. I heard the hissing sound of her garrote being pulled from her belt loops.

We started forward, occasionally touching each other’s shoulders to keep our bearings. I ducked as a giant strode over me. We wove our way through a legion of zombie cavalry, their spears bristling with frosty light, their horses’ dead white eyes staring at nothing.

I heard a war cry that sounded as if it had come from Halfborn Gunderson. I hoped he hadn’t taken his shirt off like he normally did in combat. Otherwise he might catch cold while he fought to the death.

Another rune exploded over the prow:



*Isa, ice*, which must have been easy to cast in Niflheim. A wave of frost surged across *Naglfar*’s port side, turning a whole swath of giants into ice sculptures.

In the gray morning light, I caught the glint of a small bronze object flying toward Captain Hrym, and I thought one of my friends had lobbed a grenade. But instead of exploding, the “grenade” enlarged as it fell, expanding to an impossibly large size, until the captain and a dozen of his nearest jotun friends disappeared under a metal duck the size of a Starbucks store.

Near the starboard rail, another bronze mallard ballooned into being, pushing a battalion of zombies into the sea. Giants screamed and fell back in chaos, as one does when large metal ducks rain from the sky.

“Expand-o-ducks,” I said. “Blitz outdid himself.”

“Keep going,” Alex said. “We’re close now.”

Perhaps we shouldn’t have spoken. In the nearest line of zombie warriors, a thane with golden armbands turned his wolf-faced helmet in our

direction. A snarl rattled in his rib cage.

He said something in a language I didn't know—his voice wet and hollow like water dripping in a coffin. His men drew rusted swords from moldy sheaths and turned to face us.

I glanced at Sam and Alex. They were visible, so I assumed I was, too. Like some sort of bad joke—the kind of magical protection you'd expect from Mr. Alderman—our othala cover had broken in the exact center of the ship's main deck in front of a legion of undead.

Zombies encircled us. Most of the giants were still running forward to deal with our friends, but a few jotuns noticed us, yelled in outrage, and came to join the killing party.

"Well, Sam," Alex said. "It's been nice knowing you."

"What about me?" I asked.

"Jury's still out." She turned into a mountain lion and lunged at the draugr thane, biting his head clean off, then moved through the ranks, changing form effortlessly from wolf to human to eagle, each one deadlier than the last.

Sam pulled out her Valkyrie spear. With searing light, she blasted through the undead, burning dozens at a time, but hundreds more pressed forward, their swords and spears bristling.

I drew Jack and yelled, "Fight!"

"OKAY!" he yelled back, sounding just as panicked as I was. He whirled around me, doing his best to keep me safe, but I found myself with a problem particular to children of Frey.

Einherjar have a saying: *Kill the healer first.*

This military philosophy was perfected by seasoned Viking warriors who, once in Valhalla, learned to play video games. The idea is simple: you target any guy in the enemy's ranks who can heal your opponents' wounds and send them back into combat. Kill the healer, and the rest die sooner. Besides, the healer is probably soft and squishy and easy to eliminate.

Evidently giants and zombies also knew this pro tip. Maybe they played the same video games einherjar did while waiting for Doomsday. Somehow, they pegged me for a healer, ignored Alex and Sam, and crowded toward me. Arrows flew past my ears. Spears jabbed at my belly. Axes hurtled between my legs. The quarters were much too close for so many combatants. Most of the draugr weapons found draugr targets, but I supposed zombies didn't worry too much about friendly fire.

I did what I could to look fighterly. With my einherji strength, I punched straight through the nearest zombie's chest cavity, which was like punching through a vat of dry ice. Then, as he fell, I grabbed his sword and impaled his nearest comrade.

"Who needs a healer now?" I yelled.

For about ten seconds, we seemed to be doing okay. Another rune exploded. Another expand-o-duck visited mallard-shaped destruction upon our enemies. From the prow came the sharp report of T.J.'s 1861 Springfield. I heard Mallory cursing in Gaelic.

Halfborn Gunderson yelled, "I AM HALFBORN OF FLÄM!"

To which a dim-witted giant replied, "Fläm? What a dump!"

"RARRRRGHHH!" Halfborn's howl of anger shook the boat, followed by the sound of his battle-ax plowing through rows of bodies.

Alex and Sam fought like twin demons—Sam's blazing spear and Alex's razor-sharp garrote scything through the undead with equal speed.

But with so many enemies surrounding us, it was only a matter of time before a hit connected. The butt of a spear caught me on the side of my head and I crumpled to my knees.

"Señor!" Jack shouted.

I saw a zombie's ax blade hurtling toward my face. I knew Jack wouldn't have time to stop it. With all the poetic prowess of a Kvasir's Mead drinker, I thought, *Well, this sucks.*

Then something happened that was *not* my death.

Angry pressure built in my stomach—a certainty that all this fighting had to stop, *must* stop if we were going to complete our mission. I roared even louder than Halfborn Gunderson.

Golden light exploded outward in all directions, blasting across the deck of the ship, ripping swords from their owners' hands, turning projectiles in midair and sending them hurtling into the sea, stripping entire battalions of their spears and shields and axes.

I staggered to my feet.

The fighting had stopped. Every weapon within the sound of my voice had been violently blasted out of its owner's reach. Even Jack had gone flying somewhere off the starboard side, which I imagined I'd be hearing about later if I survived. Everyone on the ship, friend and enemy, had been disarmed by the Peace of Frey, a power I'd only managed to invoke once before.

Wary giants and confused zombies backed away from me. Alex and Sam ran to my side.

My head throbbed. My vision swam. One of my molars was missing, and my mouth was full of blood.

The Peace of Frey was a pretty good party trick. It definitely got everyone's attention. But it wasn't a permanent fix. Nothing would stop our enemies from simply retrieving their weapons and returning to the business of healer-slaughter.

But before the moment of empty-handed awe wore off, a familiar voice spoke somewhere to my left: "Well, now, Magnus. That was dramatic!"

The draugr parted to reveal Loki in his crisp white admiral's uniform, his hair the color of autumn leaves, his scarred lips twisted in a grin, his eyes bright with malicious humor.

Behind him stood Sigyn, his long-suffering wife, who had spent centuries collecting serpent venom in a cup to keep it from dripping into Loki's face—a duty which was *totally* not covered in your typical marriage vows. Her pale, emaciated face was impossible to read, though bloodred tears still streamed from her eyes. I thought I detected a slight tightness in her lips, as if she were disappointed to see me again.

"Loki..." I spat blood. I could barely make my mouth work. "I challenge you to a flyting."

He stared at me as if waiting for me to complete the sentence. Maybe he expected me to add: *a flyting...with this other guy who's good at insults and way more intimidating than I am.*

Around us, the endless ranks of warriors seemed to be holding their breath, even though the zombies had no breath to hold.

Njord, Frigg, Skadi—all of them had assured me that Loki would *have* to accept my challenge. That was tradition. Honor demanded it. I might have a busted mouth, a ringing head, and no guarantee that the Mead of Kvasir would weave poetry with my vocal cords, but at least I would now get my shot to defeat the trickster in a war of words.

Loki lifted his face to the cold gray sky and laughed.

"Thanks anyway, Magnus Chase," he said. "But I think I'll just kill you."

## I Start Small

**SAM LUNGED.** I guess she was the *least* surprised that Loki would pull a sleazeball move like refusing my challenge.

Before her spear could hit her father's chest, a loud voice roared, "STOP!"

Sam stopped.

My mind was still fuzzy. For a second, I thought Loki had shouted the order, and Sam had been forced to obey. All Sam's training and practice, her fasting and confidence, had been for nothing.

Then I realized Loki hadn't given the order at all. In fact, he looked quite annoyed. Sam had stopped of her own free will. Crowds of draugr and giants parted as Captain Hrym limped toward us. His ax was missing. His fancy rib-cage shield was dented with an impression that might have been made by a very large duck's bill.

His ancient face wasn't any prettier up close. Wisps of icicle-white beard clung to his chin. His pale blue eyes gleamed deep in their sockets like they were melting their way into his brain. His leathery mouth made it difficult to tell if he was glowering at us or about to spit out a watermelon seed.

And the captain's smell: *yeesh*. Hrym's moldy white furs made me nostalgic for the regular "old man" odors of Uncle Randolph's closet.

"Who called for a challenge?" Hrym boomed.

"I did," I said. "A flyting against Loki, unless he is too scared to face me."

The crowd murmured, "Ooooohhhhh."

Loki snarled. “Oh, please. You can’t bait me, Magnus Chase. Hrym, we don’t have time for this. The ice has melted. The way is clear. Smash these trespassers and let’s sail!”

“Now wait a minute!” Hrym said. “This is my ship! I am captain!”

Loki sighed. He took off his admiral’s hat and punched the inside, obviously trying to control his temper.

“My dear friend.” He smiled up at the captain. “We’ve been through this. We *share* command of *Naglfar*.”

“Your troops,” Hrym said. “My ship. And when we are in disagreement, all ties must be broken by Surt.”

“*Surt?*” I gulped down another mouthful of blood. I wasn’t thrilled to hear the name of my least favorite fire giant—the dude who’d blasted a hole in my chest and knocked my flaming corpse off the Longfellow Bridge. “Is, uh, Surt here, too?”

Loki snorted. “A fire giant in Niflheim? Not likely. You see, my dense young einherji, Surt technically owns this ship—but that’s just because *Naglfar* is registered in Muspellheim. More favorable tax laws.”

“That’s not the point!” yelled Hrym. “Since Surt is not here, final command is mine!”

“No,” Loki said with strained patience. “Final command is *ours*. And I say our troops need to get moving!”

“And I say a properly issued challenge must be accepted! Those are standard rules of engagement. Unless you *are* too cowardly, as the boy claims.”

Loki laughed. “Cowardly? Of facing a child like this? Oh, please! He’s nothing.”

“Well, then,” I said. “Show us your silver tongue—unless that got burned along with the rest of your face.”

“Ooooohhhhhh!” said the crowd.

Alex raised an eyebrow at me. Her expression seemed to say *That was not as lame as I might have expected*.

Loki gazed at the heavens. “Father Farbauti, Mother Laufey, why me? My talents are wasted on this audience!”

Hrym turned to me. “Will you and your allies abide by a cease-fire until the flyting is done?”

Alex responded, “Magnus is our flyter, not our leader. But, yes, we will hold off our attacks.”

“Even the ducks?” Hrym asked gravely.

Alex frowned, as if this was a serious request indeed. “Very well. Even the ducks.”

“Then it is agreed!” Hrym bellowed. “Loki, you have been challenged! By ancient custom, you must accept!”

Loki bit back whatever insult he was going to fling at the captain, probably because Hrym was twice as tall as he was. “Very well. I will insult Magnus Chase into the deck boards and smear his remains under my shoe. *Then we will sail!* Samirah, dear, hold my hat.”

He tossed his admiral’s cap. Samirah let it fall at her feet.

She smiled at him coldly. “Hold your own hat, *Father*.”

“Ooooohhhhh!” said the crowd.

Anger rippled across Loki’s face. I could almost see the ideas churning in his head—all the wonderful ways he could torture us to death—but he said nothing.

“A FLYTING!” Hrym announced. “Until it is over, let no more blows be struck! Let no more ducks be thrown! Allow those enemy warriors forward to see the contest!”

With some jostling and cursing, our friends made their way through the crowd. Considering what they’d been through, they looked all right.

Halfborn had indeed taken off his shirt. Written across his chest in what looked like giant’s blood was FLÄM with a big heart around it.

T.J.’s rifle muzzle steamed in the cold from so many discharges. His bayonet dripped zombie slime, and his bugle had been twisted into a brass pretzel. (I couldn’t really blame our enemies for doing that.)

Hearthstone looked unharmed but drained, which was understandable after destroying so many enemies with ice and lightning. At his side strode Blitzen, and giants ten times the dwarf’s size scrambled to get out of his way. Some muttered fearfully, calling him *Duck Master*. Others clawed at their necks, which Blitzen had somehow collared with tight-fitting chain mail neckties. Giants live in fear of neckties.

Mallory Keen was hopping, apparently having re-broken the same foot she’d broken in Norway. But she hopped fiercely, like a true warrior and daughter of Frigg. She sheathed her knives and signed to me, *I have the walnut.*

That would have made a great code phrase if we were spies talking about a nuclear weapon or something. Unfortunately, she just meant that

she had the walnut. Now it was up to me to get Loki into it. I wondered if Mallory could open it and suck him inside without me first beating him in insult combat. Probably not. Nothing so far had been that simple. I doubted easy mode would start now.

Finally, Jack came floating back to me, grumbling, “Peace-of-Freying me? Not cool, señor.” Then he settled next to Samirah to watch the action.

The crowd made a rough circle maybe thirty feet in diameter around Loki and me. Surrounded by giants, I felt like I was at the bottom of a well. In the sudden quiet, I could hear the rumble of snow thunder in the distance, the crackle of melting glacial ice, the quiver and whine of *Naglfar*’s iron mooring cables straining to break free.

My head throbbed. My busted mouth oozed blood. The hole where my tooth used to be had started to hurt, and I did not feel poetic.

Loki grinned. He spread his arms as if to welcome me with an embrace.

“Well, Magnus, look at you—flyting in the big leagues like a grown-up! Or whatever you call an einherji who can’t age but is learning to be not *quite* so much of a whiny brat. If you weren’t such a useless piece of fluff, I might be impressed!”

The words stung. I mean they *literally* stung. They seemed to splash into my ear canals like acid, trickling down my eustachian tubes and into my throat. I tried to reply, but Loki thrust his scarred face into mine.

“Little son of Frey,” he said. “Walking into a battle he can’t win, with no clue, no planning—just a little mead in his stomach! Did you really think that would compensate for your complete lack of skill? I suppose it makes sense. You’re so used to relying on your friends to do all your fighting. Now it’s your turn! Sad! A no-talent loser! Do you even know what you *are*, Magnus Chase? Should I tell you?”

The crowd laughed and jostled each other. I didn’t dare look at my friends. Shame washed through me.

“Y-you’re one to talk,” I managed. “Are you a giant masquerading as a god, or a god masquerading as a giant? Are you on anybody’s side but your own?”

“Of course not!” Loki laughed. “We’re all free agents on this ship, aren’t we, gang? We look out for ourselves!”

The giants roared. The zombies shifted and hissed, their icy blue auras crackling in their skulls.

“Loki looks out for Loki.” He drummed his fingers on his admiralty medals. “I can’t trust anyone else, can I?”

His wife, Sigyn, tilted her head ever so slightly, but Loki didn’t seem to notice.

“At least I’m honest about it!” Loki continued. “And to answer your question, I’m a giant! But here’s the thing, Magnus. The Aesir are just a different generation of giants. So they’re giants, too! This whole gods-versus-giants thing is ridiculous. We’re one big unhappy family. That’s something you should understand, you dysfunctional little human. You say you choose your family. You say you’ve got a new group of brothers and sisters in Valhalla, and isn’t that sweet? Stop lying to yourself. You’re *never* free of your blood. You are just like your real family. As weak and love-besotted as Frey. As desperate and spineless as old Uncle Randolph. And as stupidly optimistic and as *dead* as your mother. Poor kid. You’ve got the worst of both sides, Frey and Chase. You’re a mess!”

The crowd laughed. They seemed to grow larger, drowning me in their shadows.

Loki loomed over me. “Stop lying to yourself, Magnus. You’re *nobody*. You’re a *mistake*, one of Frey’s many bastards. He left your mom, forgot you completely until you recovered his sword.”

“That’s not true.”

“But it is! You know it! At least I *claim* my children. Sam and Alex here—they’ve known me since they were little kids! But you? You’re not even worth Frey sending a birthday card. And who does your hair?”

He howled. “Oh, right. Alex cut it, didn’t she? You didn’t think that *meant* anything, did you? She doesn’t care about Magnus Chase. She just needed to use you. She’s her mother’s child. I’m so proud.”

Alex’s face was livid, but she didn’t speak. None of my friends moved or made a sound. This was my fight. They couldn’t interfere.

Where was the magic of Kvasir’s Mead? Why couldn’t I come up with a decent zinger? Did I really think the mead could compensate for my complete lack of skill?

Wait...those were Loki’s words, burrowing into my brain. I couldn’t let him define me.

“You’re evil,” I said. Even that sounded halfhearted.

“Oh, come on!” Loki grinned. “Don’t throw that good-and-evil stuff at me. That’s not even a Norse concept. Are you *good* because you kill your

enemies, but your enemies are *bad* because they kill you? What sort of logic is that?"

He leaned in close. He was definitely taller than I was now. The top of my head barely reached his shoulders. "A little secret, Magnus. There is no good and evil. There's only capable and incapable. I am *capable*. You...are not."

He didn't push me, not physically, but I stumbled back. I was literally withering under the laughter of the crowd. Even Blitzen was taller than me now. Behind Loki, Sigyn watched me with interest, her red tears glistening down her cheeks.

"Aww." Loki pouted with fake sympathy. "What are you going to do now, Magnus? Complain that I'm mean? Criticize me for murder and deceit? Go right ahead! Sing my greatest hits! You just wish you were so capable. You can't fight. You can't think on your feet. You can't even express yourself in front of your so-called friends! What chance do you have against me?"

I continued to shrink. A few more lines from Loki and I would be two feet tall. Around my boots, the deck began to scratch and shift, finger- and toenails curling upward like hungry plant shoots.

"Give it your best shot!" Loki challenged. "No? Still tongue-tied? Then I guess I'll tell you what I *really* think of you!"

I looked at the leering faces of giants, and the grim faces of my friends, all forming a ring around me, and I knew this was a well I would never climb out of.



## I Have a Big Finish

I DESPERATELY tried to think of my best insults: *You're a meinfretr. You're dumb. You're ugly.*

Yeah...my best really wasn't that impressive, especially coming from a guy who was literally shrinking under Loki's onslaught.

Hoping for inspiration, I glanced again at my friends. Sam looked stern and determined, somehow still believing in me. Alex Fierro looked angry and defiant, somehow still believing that if I messed this up, she would kill me. Blitz had developed a tic in his eye like he was watching me ruin a beautiful tailoring job. Hearthstone seemed sad and weary, scrutinizing my face as if searching for a lost rune. T.J., Mallory, and Halfborn were all tense, scanning the giants around them, probably trying to formulate a Plan B in which the *B* stood for *Bad Magnus*.

Then my gaze rested on Sigyn, standing discreetly behind her husband, her hands laced, her strange red eyes fixed on me as if she were waiting.

Waiting for what? She had stood by her husband's side when everyone else abandoned him. For centuries, she had tended to him, keeping the snake's venom from his face as much as she could, despite the fact that Loki had cheated on her, verbally abused her, ignored her. Even now, he barely looked at her.

Sigyn was loyal beyond belief. Yet back in Loki's cave, during the giant's wedding ceremony, I was almost positive she had helped us, distracting her husband at a critical time to keep him from killing me and my friends.

Why would she resist her husband like that? What did she want? It was almost as if she was subtly working to undermine him, as if she wanted to

delay Ragnarok and see her husband back in his cave, lashed to the rocks and suffering.

Maybe Loki was right. Maybe he couldn't trust anyone, not even Sigyn.

Then I thought about what Percy Jackson had told me back on the deck of the USS *Constitution*: that my biggest strength wasn't my training. It was the team around me.

A flyting was supposed to cut people down to size, to insult them into nothingness. But I was a healer. I didn't cut people. I put them back together. I couldn't play by Loki's rules and hope to win. I had to play by *my* rules.

I took a deep breath. "Let me tell you about Mallory Keen."

Loki's smile wavered. "Who is that and why should I care?"

"I'm so glad you asked." I projected my voice into the crowd with as much volume and confidence as my tiny little lungs would allow. "Mallory Keen sacrificed her life to correct her own mistake and saved the lives of a bunch of schoolkids! Now she is the fiercest fighter and the best curser in Valhalla. She holds floor nineteen together as a team, even when we want to kill each other! Can any of you claim the same level of camaraderie?"

The giants shifted uncomfortably. The draugr eyed each other like *I've been wanting to kill this guy forever, but he's already dead*.

"Mallory opened the doors of Suttung's cave with just two daggers!" I continued. "She defeated the nine thralls of Baugi with nothing but trickery and a rock! And when she found out she was the daughter of Frigg, she refrained from attacking the goddess!"

"Ooh." The giants nodded appreciatively.

Loki waved aside my words. "I don't think you understand how a flyting works, little man. Those aren't even *insults*—"

"Let me tell you about Halfborn Gunderson!" I shouted over him. "Berserker extraordinaire, the glory of Fläm! He conquered kingdoms with Ivar the Boneless. He singlehandedly slew the giant Baugi, saving his hometown and making his mother proud! He has steered our boat straight and true across the Nine Worlds, his battle-ax doing more damage than most battalions, and he's done all this while wearing no shirt!"

"He pulls it off pretty well, too," muttered another giant, poking the berserker's abs. Halfborn slapped his hand away.

"And the deeds of Thomas Jefferson Junior!" I yelled. "Those are worthy of any Viking hall! He charged into enemy gunfire to meet his

nemesis, Jeffrey Toussaint, face-to-face. He died taking up an impossible challenge, like a worthy son of Tyr! He is the heart and soul of our fellowship, a driving force that never fails. He defeated the giant Hrungnir with his trusty Springfield 1861, and wears the flint shard from the giant's heart above his eye as a badge of honor. It can also light matches!"

"Mmmm." The giants nodded, no doubt thinking how handy this would be for lighting their pipes in the cold winds of Niflheim.

"And Blitzen, son of Freya!" I smiled at my dwarf friend, whose eyes were getting dewy. "He bested Eitri Junior, at the forges of Nidavellir. He makes the best cutting-edge fashions in the Nine Worlds. He sewed the magical bowling bag of Tiny! He stood face-to-face, empty-handed against the dragon Alderman and forced the monster to back down. His patented stainless-steel neckties and expand-o-ducks are the stuff of jotun nightmares!"

Several giants wailed in terrified agreement.

"Stop this!" Loki spat. "This is ridiculous! What's all this—this positivity? Magnus Chase, your hair is still horrible and your clothes—"

"Hearthstone!" I roared. Was it my imagination, or was I getting taller again? It seemed I could look my opponent in the eyes now without straining my neck. "The greatest rune magician in the Nine Worlds! His bravery is legendary! He is willing to sacrifice anything for his friends. He has overcome the most horrible challenges—the death of his brother, the scorn of his family..." My voice cracked with emotion, but Loki did not speak into the void. The crowd stared at me expectantly, some with tears in their eyes.

"His own father turned into a dragon," I said. "Yet *Hearthstone* faced him, faced his worst nightmares and emerged victorious, breaking a curse, destroying hatred with compassion. Without him, we would not be here. He is the mightiest and most beloved elf I know. He is my brother."

Hearthstone placed his hand on his heart. His face was as pink as the scarf Alex had given him.

Captain Hrym sniffled. It seemed like he wanted to give Hearthstone a hug but was afraid that might not look good in front of his crew.

"Samirah al-Abbas," I said. "Daughter of Loki, but better than Loki!"

Loki laughed. "I *beg* your pardon? This girl is not even—"

"A Valkyrie, sworn to Odin's most important tasks!" My words were coming easily now. I could feel a rhythm to them, an unstoppable cadence

and certainty. Maybe that was because of Kvasir's Mead. Or maybe it was because I was speaking the truest things I knew. "You have felt her spear of light scorch your forces in combat! Her stamina is steel. Her faith is unwavering. She has overcome her father's sway! She saved our ship from the dreaded vatnavaettir! She outflew the great Baugi in his eagle form, delivering Kvasir's Mead to our crew! And she has done all of this while *fasting for Ramadan.*"

Several giants gasped. Some put their hands to their throats as if just realizing how thirsty they were.

"Samirah," Loki growled, "turn into a lizard and scuttle away, my dear."

Sam frowned at him. "No, Father, I don't think I will. Why don't you?"

"Oooh!" Some of the giants even clapped.

I was definitely taller than usual now. Or wait...Loki was getting shorter.

But I needed more. I turned to Alex. "Let me tell you all about Alex Fierro!"

"Saving the best for last?" Alex asked, a hint of challenge in her voice.

"She is our secret weapon!" I said. "The Terror of Jorvik! The creator of Pottery Barn, ceramic warrior!"

"I got some lovely place mats at Pottery Barn," one of the giants muttered to a friend.

"At the House of Chase, he decapitated a wolf with nothing more than a wire, then drank guava juice from the horn of my ancestors!"

"He?" asked a giant.

"Just go with it," said another.

"She once decapitated Grimwolf the elder lindworm!" I continued. "She defeated the sorcery of Utgard-Loki in a bowling tournament of horrors! She won the trust and affection of the goddess Sif! She kept me alive across the frozen sea of Niflheim, and when she kissed me under that blanket yesterday..." I met Alex's two-color eyes. "Well, that was just about the best thing that ever happened to me."

I turned toward Loki. My face was burning. I'd spoken maybe just a wee bit more truth than I'd intended, but I couldn't let that break my momentum.

"Loki, you asked me who I am? I'm part of this team. I'm Magnus Chase from floor nineteen, Hotel Valhalla. I'm the son of Frey, son of Natalie, friend of Mallory, Halfborn, T.J., Blitzen, Hearthstone, Samirah,

and Alex. This is my family! This is my othala. I know they will always support me, which is why I'm standing here, triumphant, on *your* ship, surrounded by my family, and you...even in the midst of thousands, you. Are. Still. Alone."

Loki hissed. He backed into a wall of scowling draugr. "I am not alone! Sigyn! Dear wife!"

Sigyn had vanished. At some point during the flyting, she must have retreated into the crowd. That silent act spoke louder than centuries of verbal abuse.

"Alex! Samirah!" Loki tried for a confident smile. "Come on, my dears. You know I love you! Don't be difficult. Kill your friends for me and all will be forgiven."

Alex adjusted her shaggy green fur cloak over her sweater vest. "Sorry, Mom. I'm afraid I gotta say no."

Loki dashed toward Samirah, who pushed him back at spear point. The trickster was about three feet tall now. He tried changing form. Fur sprouted across his brow. Fishy scales appeared on the backs of his hands. Nothing seemed to stick.

"You can't hide from yourself, Loki," I said. "No matter what form you take, you're still you—alone, scorned, bitter, faithless. Your insults are hollow and desperate. You don't stand a chance against us, because you don't have an *us*. You are Loki, always alone."

"I hate you all!" the god screamed, spittle flying. Acid oozed from his pores, hissing against the deck. "None of you are worthy of my company, much less my leadership!"

As Loki shrank, his scarred face rippled, contorting with rage. Acid steamed in puddles all around him. I wondered if this was all the venom that Skadi's viper had dripped on him over the centuries, or if it was simply part of Loki's essence. Perhaps Sigyn had tried to shield Loki from the snake because she knew her husband was already full of poison. He could barely keep his human form from liquefying into the stuff.

"You think your happy friendship speech means anything?" he snarled. "Is it time for a group hug now? You make me sick!"

"You'll have to speak up," I said. "It's hard to hear you from way down there."

Loki paced and ranted, no more than a few inches tall now, wading through puddles of his own venom. "I will kill you slowly! I will have Hel

torture the spirits of everyone you love! I will—”

“Escape?” Samirah asked, blocking Loki with her spear point as he darted left. He ran to the right, but Alex put down her pink ski boot to stop him.

“I don’t think so, Mom,” said Alex. “I like you down there. And now, Mallory Keen has a lovely parting gift for you.”

Mallory hopped forward and brought out the walnut.

“No!” Loki squeaked. “No, you wouldn’t dare! I will never—”

Mallory tossed the nut toward the miniature god. The shell opened, inhaling Loki with a vicious sucking noise, then snapped shut again. The walnut rattled and quivered on the deck. A little voice was shouting obscenities from inside, but the shell remained sealed.

The giants frowned down at the walnut.

Captain Hrym cleared his throat. “Well, that was interesting.” He turned to me. “Congratulations, Magnus Chase! You won that flying fair and square. I am impressed! I hope you’ll accept my apology for having to kill you all now.”



## Why Do They Get Cannons? I Want Cannons

I DID NOT accept his apology.

Neither did my friends. They formed a protective ring around me and began slashing through the enemy ranks, slowly shuffling toward the starboard side of the ship.

Still hopping on one leg, Mallory Keen scooped up her evil walnut and dropped it into her pocket, then demonstrated her dual-knife-wielding prowess by stabbing her blades into Captain Hrym's crotch.

Halfborn and T.J. fought like killing machines. I didn't want to give myself credit for their gusto, but the way they plowed through troops of draugr was awe-inspiring, almost as if they were determined to be as good as I'd described them—as if my words had made them larger while making Loki smaller.

“Follow me!” Sam yelled, her spear of light blasting a path to starboard. Alex swung her garrote like a whip, lopping off the heads of any giants who came too close.

I was afraid Blitzen might get trampled in the crush, but Hearthstone knelt and let the dwarf climb onto his shoulders. Okay, that was a new one. I didn't think Hearth had the physical strength to carry Blitz, who was short but stout and hardly a little kid. Yet Hearth managed, and from the unquestioning way Blitz accepted the ride, I got the feeling they'd done this before.

Blitz threw neckties and expand-o-ducks like Mardi Gras beads, sowing terror in the enemy's ranks. Meanwhile Hearth lobbed a familiar rune toward the foredeck:

# M

*Ehwaz*, the rune of the steed, exploded with golden light. Suddenly, floating in the air above us, was our old friend Stanley the eight-legged horse.

Stanley surveyed the chaos, whinnied as if to say *Fight scene cameo?* Okay. Then he leaped into the fray, fly-galloping on the skulls of jotuns and generally causing havoc.

Jack, buzzing angrily, flew to my side. “I have a blade to grind with you, señor.”

“What?” I ducked as a spear flew over my head.

“You give this beautiful speech,” Jack said. “And who do you leave out? *Really?*”

Jack hilt-punched a giant so hard the poor guy flew backward, domino-toppling a line of zombie cavalry.

I gulped down my mortification. How could I have forgotten my sword? Jack *hated* being forgotten.

“Jack, you were my secret weapon!” I said.

“You said that about Alex!”

“Uh, I mean you were my ace in the hole! I was saving the best for, you know, emergency poetry!”

“A likely story!” He chopped through the nearest clump of draugr like a Vitamix.

“I—I’ll get Bragi the god of poetry to *personally* write an epic about you!” I blurted out, regretting the promise as soon as I made it. “You’re the best sword ever! Honestly!”

“An epic, huh?” He glowed a brighter shade of red, or maybe that was all the gore dripping from his blade. “By Bragi, huh?”

“Absolutely!” I said. “Now let’s get out of here. Show me your best stuff so, you know, I can describe it to Bragi later.”

“Hmph.” Jack whirled toward a metropolitan giant, snicker-snacking him into natty pieces. “I suppose I can do that.”

He went to work, slashing our enemies like a frantic Black Friday shopper rifling through clothes racks. “No, no, no!” Jack yelled. “I don’t like you! Get out of my way! You’re ugly!”

Soon our little cluster of heroes reached the starboard rail. Unfortunately, the drop over the side was four hundred feet at least, straight into the icy gray waters. My stomach twisted. This was *twice* as long a fall as the one I'd flubbed from the mainmast of Old Ironsides.

"We'll die if we jump," Mallory noted.

The enemy horde pressed us against the rail. No matter how well we fought, our enemies wouldn't even have to *hit* us to kill us now. Their sheer numbers would flatten us or push us overboard.

I pulled out my yellow handkerchief. "I can summon *Mikillgulr*, the way we did in Aegir's hall."

"Except we're falling *down* now," Alex said. "Not floating up. And there's no Njord to protect us."

"She's right," Blitz yelled, throwing a generous handful of neckties to his admirers. "Even if the ship doesn't break apart on impact, all our bones will."

Sam peered over the side. "And even if we survived, those guns would blow our ship out of the water."

"Guns?" I followed her gaze. I hadn't noticed them before, probably because the ports had been closed, but now the side of *Naglfar*'s hull bristled with rows of cannon muzzles.

"That's not fair," I said. "Vikings didn't have cannons. How come *Naglfar* gets cannons?"

T.J. jabbed a zombie with his bayonet. "I'll be sure to lodge a complaint with the Ragnarok Rules Committee. But right now, whatever we're going to do, we need to do it!"

"Agreed!" Halfborn shouted, his ax slicing through a pack of skeletal wolves.

"I've got a plan," Sam announced. "You're not going to like it."

"I love it!" Blitz cried. "What is it?"

"Jump," Sam said.

Alex ducked a javelin. "But the whole breaking-every-bone-in-our-bodies thing...?"

"No time to explain," Sam said. "Jump!"

When your Valkyrie tells you to jump, you jump. I was the first one over the side. I tried to remember what Percy had told me—skydiver, eagle, arrow, butt—though I knew that falling from this height, none of it would matter.

I hit the water with a mighty *floom*. I had died enough times to know what to expect—a sudden overwhelming surge of pain followed by complete darkness. But that didn’t happen. Instead, I bobbed to the surface, gasping and shivering but completely unharmed. I realized something was buoying me up.

The water churned and bubbled around me like I’d fallen into a Jacuzzi. Between my legs, the current felt almost solid, as if I was sitting astride a creature sculptured from the sea. Directly in front of me, a head rose from the waves—a strong neck of gray water, a mane of frost, a majestic snout spewing plumes of icy mist from its nostrils. I was riding a vatnavaettir—a water horse.

My friends plunged into the water, too, each dropping right onto the back of a waiting horse spirit. The vatnavaettir whinnied and bucked as spears rained down around us.

“Let’s move!” Sam swooped down with her blazing spear and settled onto the back of the lead water horse. “Toward the mouth of the bay!”

The horses raced away from the Ship of the Dead. Giants and draugr screamed in outrage. Spears and arrows splashed in the water. Cannons boomed. Shells exploded near enough to spray us with water, but the vatnavaettir were faster and more maneuverable than any ship. They zigged and zagged, rocketing across the bay with incredible speed.

Jack flew up beside me. “Hey, señor, did you see that one disembowelment I did?”

“Yeah,” I said. “It was amazing!”

“And the way I cut off that jotun’s limbs?”

“Right!”

“I hope you were taking notes for Bragi’s epic.”

“Absolutely!” I made a mental note to start taking more mental notes.

A different equine figure zoomed above us—Stanley the eight-legged horse, checking that we were okay. He whinnied like *Okay, guess we’re done here? Have a nice day!*

Then he shot toward the steel gray clouds.

The water horse was surprisingly warm, like a living animal, which kept my legs and crotch from freezing completely in the frigid water. Still, I remembered Mallory’s and Halfborn’s stories about vatnavaettir dragging their victims to the bottom of the sea. How was Samirah controlling them? If the herd decided to take a dive, we were all dead.

Yet we kept racing forward, toward the gap in the glaciers at the mouth of the bay. Already I could see the water beginning to refreeze, the ice floes thickening and hardening. Summer in Niflheim, which lasted about twelve minutes, was now over.

Behind us, the boom of cannons carried over the water, but the ship *Naglfar* remained at its moorings. I could only hope, since we had their admiral in a walnut, the ship would be forced to stay there.

We shot out of the bay into the frosty sea, our water horses picking us a path through the broken ice floes. Then we turned south toward the much safer, monster-infested open waters of Jotunheim.

## If You Understand What Happens in This Chapter, Please Tell Me, Because I Have No Clue

**THREE DAYS** is a long time to sail with an evil walnut.

After the water horses dumped us—“They got bored,” Sam explained, which was far better than them drowning us—I summoned the *Big Banana* and we all climbed aboard. Hearthstone managed to invoke the fire rune kenaz, which saved us from freezing to death. We sailed west, trusting our magic ship to take us where we needed to go.

The first twelve hours or so, we were all running on pure adrenaline and terror. We got into dry clothes. I healed Mallory’s foot. We ate. We didn’t talk much. We grunted and pointed at things we needed. No one slept. Sam chanted her prayers, which was amazing, since the rest of us probably couldn’t have formed simple sentences.

Finally, when the gray sun sank and the world still hadn’t ended, we started to believe that *Naglfar* really wasn’t sailing after us. Loki would not be busting out of his tiny prison. Ragnarok wouldn’t be starting this summer, at least. We had survived.

Mallory clutched the walnut. She refused to let go of it. She huddled against the prow, examining the sea with narrowed eyes, her red hair whipping in the wind. After about an hour of this, Halfborn Gunderson sat down next her. She didn’t kill him. He muttered to her for a long time, words I didn’t try to hear. She started to cry, expelling something from herself that sounded almost as bitter as Loki’s venom. Halfborn put his arm around her, looking not happy exactly, but content.

The next day, Blitzen and Hearthstone went into nurturing mode, making sure everybody had food, everybody was warm enough, nobody was alone if they didn’t want to be. Hearth spent a lot of time listening to

T.J. talk about war and slavery and what constituted an honorable challenge. Hearth was an excellent listener.

Blitz sat with Alex Fierro all afternoon, showing her how to make a sweater vest out of chain mail. I wasn't sure Alex needed a chain mail sweater vest, but the work seemed to calm them both.

After her evening prayers, Samirah came up to me and offered me a date. (The kind you eat, of course.) We chewed our fruit and watched the strange constellations of Jotunheim blink above us.

"You were amazing," Sam said.

I let that sink in. Samirah wasn't big on doling out praise, any more than Mallory was big on doling out apologies.

"Well, it wasn't poetry," I said at last. "More like pure panic."

"Maybe there's not much difference," Sam said. "Besides, just take the compliment, Chase."

"Okay. Thank you." I stood next to her, watching the horizon. It felt nice just to be with a friend, enjoying the stars, not worrying about dying in the next five minutes.

"You did great, too," I said. "You stood up to Loki and defeated him."

Sam smiled. "Yeah. I had a lot of thanks to give in my prayers tonight."

I nodded. I wondered if I should be thanking someone, too—I mean, apart from my friends on the boat, of course. Sigyn, maybe, for her silent support, her passive resistance against her husband. If the gods put Loki back in his cave, I wondered if Sigyn would be going with him.

Maybe Uncle Randolph deserved a thank-you, too, for leaving me those notes about Kvasir's Mead. He'd tried to do something right at the end, no matter how spectacularly he'd betrayed me.

Thinking about Randolph reminded me of the voices from Helheim, tempting me to join them in the darkness. I locked that memory away. I wasn't feeling strong enough to face it just yet.

Sam pointed toward Alex, who was trying on her new sweater vest. "You should go talk to her, Magnus. That was kind of a bombshell you dropped during the flyting."

"You mean...oh." My stomach curled with embarrassment, like it was trying to hide behind my right lung. In front of my eight closest friends and several thousand enemies, I'd announced how much I'd enjoyed a private kiss from Alex.

Sam chuckled. "She probably won't be *too* mad. Go. Get it over with."

Easy for Sam to say. She knew exactly where she stood in her relationship with Amir. She was happily engaged and never had to worry about secret kisses under blankets because she was a good Muslim girl and would never do such a thing. I, alas, was not a good Muslim girl.

I walked over to Alex. Blitzen saw me coming, nodded to me nervously, and fled.

“What do you think, Magnus?” Alex spread her arms, showing off her glittering new fashion statement.

“Yeah,” I said. “I mean, not many people can pull off the plaid chain mail sweater vest, but yeah.”

“It’s not plaid,” Alex said. “It’s more *a cuadros*, like diamonds. Checkered.”

“Okay.”

“So...” She crossed her arms and sighed, examining me like *What are we going to do with you?* It was a look I’d gotten from teachers, coaches, social workers, police, and a few of my closest relatives. “That declaration of yours back on *Naglfar*—that was all very sudden, Magnus.”

“I...uh. Yeah. I wasn’t really thinking.”

“Clearly. Where did that even come from?”

“Well, you did kiss me.”

“I mean, you can’t surprise somebody like that. Suddenly I’m the greatest thing that ever happened to you?”

“I—I didn’t exactly say—” I stopped myself. “Look, if you want me to take it back...”

I couldn’t form a complete thought. And I couldn’t see any way to extract myself from this conversation with my dignity intact. I wondered if I was suffering withdrawal symptoms from Kvasir’s Mead, paying the price for my successful performance on *Naglfar*.

“I’m going to need some time,” Alex said. “I mean, I’m flattered, but this is all so out of the blue....”

“Uh.”

“I don’t just date any einherji with a pretty face and a nice haircut.”

“No. Yeah. Pretty face?”

“I appreciate the offer. Really. But let’s put this on hold and I’ll get back to you.” She held up her hands. “A little space, Chase.”

She strode off, glancing back once with a smirk that made my toes curl up in my woolen socks.

Hearthstone appeared at my side, his expression inscrutable as always. His scarf, for reasons unknown, had changed to *a cuadros*, red and white checkers. We watched Alex walking away.

“What just happened?” I asked him.

*There are no words for it in sign language*, he said.

On our third morning at sea, T.J. called from the halyard, “Hey! Land!”

I thought the expression was *land, ho!* But maybe they did things differently in the Civil War. We all jostled to the prow of the *Big Banana*. A vast flat landscape of red and gold spread across the horizon, as if we were sailing straight toward the Sahara desert.

“That’s not Boston,” I noted.

“That’s not even Midgard.” Halfborn frowned. “If our ship followed the currents *Naglfar* would have taken, that means—”

“We’re landing at Vigridr,” Mallory offered. “The Last Battlefield. This is the place where we’ll all die someday.”

Strangely, nobody screamed *Turn this boat around!*

We stood transfixed as the *Big Banana* took us in, aiming for one of a billion docks that jutted into the surf. At the end of the pier, a group of figures stood waiting—men and women, all resplendent in glittering armor and colorful cloaks. The gods had turned out to welcome us.

## I Win a Fluffy Bathrobe

ALONG THE abandoned shore, which was built up with the universe's longest boardwalk, stretched thousands of empty kiosks and miles of stanchions for queuing, with signs pointing this way and that:

JOTUNS →

← AESIR

WILL CALL →

← SCHOOL GROUPS

Our dock featured a large red sign with a stylized bird and a big number five. Underneath, in English and in runes, the sign read: REMEMBER, YOU PARKED AT RAVEN FIVE! HAVE A NICE RAGNAROK! I supposed our parking situation could have been worse. We could've docked at Bunny Rabbit Twelve or Ferret One.

I recognized many of the gods in our greeting party. Frigg stood in her cloud-white dress and glowing war helm, her bag of knitting supplies under one arm. She smiled kindly at Mallory. "My daughter, I knew you would succeed!"

I wasn't sure if she meant that in an I-could-tell-your-future way or an I-had-faith-in-you way, but I thought it was nice of her to say regardless.

Heimdall, the guardian of the Rainbow Bridge, grinned at me, his stark white eyes like frozen milk. "I saw you coming from five miles away, Magnus! That yellow boat. *WOW.*"

Thor looked like he'd just woken up. His red hair was flat on one side, his face creased with pillow marks. His hammer, Mjolnir, hung at his belt, attached to his breeches with a bike chain. He scratched his hairy abs under his Metallica T-shirt and farted amiably. "I hear you insulted Loki into a little two-inch-tall man? Good work!"

His wife, Sif, with the flowing golden hair, rushed to embrace Alex Fierro. "My dear, you look *lovely*. Is that a new sweater vest?"

A big man I'd never seen before, with dark skin, a glistening bald scalp, and black leather armor, offered his left hand to Thomas Jefferson Jr. The god's right hand was missing, the wrist covered in a gold cap. "My son. You've done well."

T.J.'s mouth fell open. "Dad?"

"Take my hand."

"I—"

"I challenge you to take my hand," the god Tyr amended.

"I accept!" T.J. said, and let himself be hauled onto the dock.

Odin was wearing a three-piece suit in charcoal gray chain mail that I guessed was custom-made by Blitzen himself. The All-Father's beard was neatly trimmed. His eye patch gleamed like stainless steel. His ravens, Thought and Memory, perched on his shoulders, their black feathers complementing his jacket beautifully.

"Hearthstone," he said. "Well done with the rune magic, lad. Those visualization tricks I taught you must have really paid off!"

Hearth smiled weakly.

From the back of the crowd, two other gods pushed forward. I'd never seen them together before, but now it was obvious how alike the twin brother and sister were. Freya, goddess of love and wealth, shone in her golden gown, the scent of roses wafting around her. "Oh, Blitzen, my beautiful boy!"

She cried red-gold tears, shedding about forty thousand dollars' worth all over the dock as she embraced her son.

Next to her stood my dad, Frey, god of summer. In his battered jeans, flannel shirt, and boots, his blond hair and beard wild and unkempt, he looked like he'd just come back from a three-day hike.

"Magnus," he said, as if we'd just seen each other five minutes ago.

"Hey, Dad."

He reached over hesitantly and patted my arm. "Good job. Really."

In runestone form, Jack buzzed and tugged until I let him off my neck chain. He expanded into sword form, glowing purple with irritation. “Hi, Jack,” he said, mimicking Frey’s deep voice. “How you doing, Jack, old buddy?”

Frey winced. “Hello, Sumarbrander. I didn’t mean to ignore you.”

“Yeah, yeah. Well, *Magnus* here is going to get *Bragi* to write an epic poem about me!”

Frey raised an eyebrow. “You are?”

“Uh—”

“That’s right!” Jack huffed. “*Frey* never got *Bragi* to write an epic poem about me! The only thing *he* ever gave me was a stupid Hallmark Sword’s Day card.”

Added to my mental notes: there was such a thing as Sword’s Day. I silently cursed the greeting-card industry.

My father smiled, a little sadly. “You’re right, Jack. A good sword deserves a good friend.” Frey squeezed my shoulder. “And it looks like you’ve found one.”

I appreciated the heartwarming sentiment. On the other hand, I was afraid my dad had just turned my rash promise about finding Bragi into a divinely ordained decree.

“Friends!” Odin called. “Let us retire to our feasting tent on the field of Vigridr! I have reserved tent Lindworm Seven! That’s Lindworm Seven. If you get lost, follow the mauve arrows. Once there”—his expression turned brooding—“we will discuss the fate of all living things.”

I’m telling you, you can’t even get a meal with these gods without discussing the fate of all living things.

The feast tent was set up in the middle of the field of Vigridr, which was a long way from the docks, since (according to Samirah) Vigridr stretched three hundred miles in every direction. Fortunately, Odin had arranged for a small fleet of golf carts.

The landscape was mostly grasslands of red and gold, with the occasional river, hill, and stand of trees, just for variety. The pavilion itself was made of cured leather, the sides open, the main hearth blazing, and the tables laden with food. It made me think of pictures I’d seen from old travel

magazines, of people having luxury safari banquets on the African savannah. My mom used to love travel magazines.

The gods sat at the thanes' table, as one might expect. Valkyries hurried around serving everyone, though they got distracted when they saw Samirah and came over to give her hugs and gossip.

Once everyone was settled and the mead was poured, Odin pronounced in a grave voice: "Bring forth the walnut!"

Mallory rose. With a quick glance at Frigg, who nodded encouragement, Mallory walked to a freestanding stone pedestal in front of the hearth. She set down the walnut then returned to her seat.

The gods all leaned forward. Thor glowered. Tyr laced his left-hand fingers with the nonexistent digits on his right hand. Frey stroked his blond beard.

Freya pouted. "I don't like walnuts, even if they *are* a great source of omega-three fatty acids."

"This walnut has no nutritional value, sister," Frey said. "It holds Loki."

"Yes, I know." She frowned. "I was just saying, in general..."

"Is Loki quite secure?" Tyr asked. "He won't pop out and challenge me to personal combat?"

The god sounded wistful, as if he'd been dreaming about that possibility.

"The walnut will hold him," Frigg said. "At least until we return him to his chains."

"Bah!" Thor raised his hammer. "I say I should just smash him right now! Save us all a lot of trouble."

"Honey," said Sif, "we've talked about this."

"Indeed," said Odin, his ravens squawking on the high back of his throne. "My noble son Thor, we've been over this approximately eight thousand six hundred and thirty times. I'm not sure you're using strategies for active listening. We cannot change our foretold destinies."

Thor huffed. "Well, what's the use of being a god, then? I've got a perfectly good hammer and this nut is just begging to be cracked! Why not CRACK it?"

That sounded like a pretty reasonable plan to me, but I didn't say so. I was not in the habit of disagreeing with Odin the All-Father, who controlled my afterlife and my minibar privileges at the Hotel Valhalla.

“Maybe...” I said, self-conscious as all eyes turned toward me. “I dunno....We could come up with a more secure place to keep him, at least? Like—I’m just thinking aloud here—a maximum-security prison with actual guards? And chains that aren’t made from the intestines of his sons? Or, you know, we could just avoid the intestine thing altogether....”

Odin chuckled, like I was a puppy that had learned a new trick. “Magnus Chase, you and your friends have acted bravely and nobly. Now you must leave matters to the gods. We cannot change Loki’s punishment in any meaningful way. We can only restore it to what it was, so that the great sequence of events leading to Ragnarok will be held in check. At least for now.”

“Hmph.” Thor quaffed his mead. “We keep delaying Ragnarok. Why not just get it over with? I could use a good fight!”

“Well, my son,” said Frigg, “we are delaying Ragnarok because it will destroy the cosmos as we know it, and because most of us will die. You included.”

“Besides,” Heimdall added, “we *just* now got the ability to take quality selfies on our cell phones. Can you imagine how much better the tech will be in a few more centuries? I can’t wait to VR-stream the apocalypse to my millions of followers on the cyber-cloud!”

With a pensive expression, Tyr pointed to a nearby copse of golden trees. “I will die right over there...killed by Garm, the guard dog of Hel, but not before I smite his head in. I can’t wait for that day. I dream of Garm’s fangs ripping into my stomach.”

Thor nodded sympathetically, like *Yes, good times!*

I scanned the horizon. I, too, was destined to die here at Ragnarok, assuming I didn’t get killed in some dangerous quest before then. I didn’t know the exact location, but we might be having lunch in the very spot where I would be impaled, or Halfborn would fall with a sword in his gut, or Alex...I couldn’t think about it. Suddenly I wanted to be anywhere but here.

Samirah coughed for attention. “Lord Odin,” she said, “what *are* your plans for Loki, then, since his original bonds were cut?”

Odin smiled. “Not to worry, my brave Valkyrie. Loki will be returned to the cave of punishment. We will put new enchantments upon the place to hide its location and prevent further breaches. We will reforge his bonds,

making sure they are stronger than ever. The best dwarven smiths have agreed to undertake this task.”

“The *best* dwarven smiths?” Blitz asked.

Heimdall nodded enthusiastically. “We got a package deal on all four bindings from Eitri Junior!”

Blitz started to curse, but Hearthstone clamped a hand over his friend’s mouth. I thought for sure Blitzen would get up and start throwing expand-o-ducks in a fit of rage.

“I see...” said Samirah, clearly not excited about Odin’s plan.

“What about Sigyn?” I asked. “Will you let her stay by Loki’s side again, if she wants?”

Odin frowned. “I had not considered this.”

“It wouldn’t do any harm,” I said quickly. “She...she means well, I think. I’m pretty sure she didn’t want him to escape in the first place.”

The gods muttered among themselves.

Alex gave me a questioning look, no doubt wondering why I cared so much about the wife of Loki. I wasn’t sure myself why I felt it was important. If Sigyn wanted to be by Loki’s side, whether it was for compassion or some other reason, I figured it was the least the gods could do for her. Especially considering they’d murdered her kids and used the guts as chains for their dad.

I remembered what Loki had told me about good and evil, gods and giants. He had a point. I wasn’t necessarily sitting with the good guys. I was just sitting with one side of the final war.

“Very well,” Odin decided. “Sigyn may stay with Loki if she wishes. Any other questions about Loki’s punishment?”

I could tell that a lot of my friends wanted to stand up and say *Yes. ARE YOU CRAZY?*

But no one did. None of the gods raised objections or pulled out weapons.

“I must say,” Freya noted, “this is the best godly meeting we’ve had in centuries.” She smiled at me. “We try to avoid having too many of us together in one place. It usually leads to trouble.”

“The last time was the flying with Loki,” Thor grumbled. “In Aegir’s hall.”

I didn’t like being reminded of Aegir, but it made me remember a promise. “Lord Odin, I—I was supposed to bring Aegir a sample of

Kvasir's Mead, as payment for him sort of not killing us and sort of letting us go, but—"

"Never fear, Magnus Chase. I will speak with Aegir on your behalf. I may even grant him a small sample of Kvasir's Mead from my special reserve supply, assuming he'll put me on the list for his Pumpkin Spice."

"And me," Thor said.

"And me," said the other gods, raising their hands.

I blinked. "You...have a special reserve supply of Kvasir's Mead?"

"Of course!" said Odin.

This raised some interesting questions, such as why had the gods made us run all around creation risking our lives to get that mead from the giants when Odin could have just handed me some? That simple solution probably hadn't even occurred to Odin. He was a leader, not a sharer.

My father caught my eye. He shook his head like *Don't ask. Aesir are weird.*

"Well, then!" Odin pounded his fist on the table. "I agree with Freya. This meeting has gone surprisingly well. We will take the walnut. We will send you heroes back to Valhalla to enjoy a great feast in your honor. Any other business before we adjourn?"

"Lord Odin," Frey said. "My son and his friends have done us a great service. Shouldn't we...reward them? Isn't that customary?"

"Hmm." Odin nodded. "I suppose you're right. I could make them all einherjar in Valhalla! But, ah, most of them already are."

"And the rest of us," Sam added quickly, "would like to stay alive a little longer, Lord Odin, if you don't mind."

"Well, there you are!" Odin said. "As a reward, our living heroes will get to stay alive! I'll also give you each five autographed copies of my new book, *Motivational Heroism*. As for the einherjar, in addition to the celebratory feast and the books, I'll throw in a complimentary Hotel Valhalla Turkish bathrobe for each of you! Eh?"

Odin seemed so pleased with himself, none of us had the heart to complain. We just nodded and smiled halfheartedly.

"Hmm, Turkish bathrobe," T.J. said.

"Hmm, staying alive," Blitz said.

Nobody mentioned the autographed motivational books.

"Finally, Magnus Chase," said the All-Father, "I understand you were the one who stood toe-to-toe with Loki and took the brunt of his withering

insults. Would you ask any special boon of the gods?”

I gulped. I looked around at my friends, trying to let them know that I didn’t find it fair for me to get special treatment. Defeating Loki had been a group effort. That was the whole point. Waxing poetic about our *team* was what got Loki trapped, not my skill itself.

Besides, I didn’t keep a list of boons in my back pocket. I was a man of few needs. I was happy being boonless.

Then I recalled my Uncle Randolph’s last act of atonement, trying to steer me toward Kvasir’s Mead. I thought about how sad and lonely his house seemed now, and how happy and peaceful I’d felt on the roof deck with Alex Fierro. I even remembered a bit of advice Andvari’s ring had whispered in my mind, right before I’d given the golden treasure back to the fish.

*Othala.* Inheritance. The hardest rune of all to make sense of.

“Actually, Lord Odin,” I said, “there *is* one favor I would ask.”



FORTY-SEVEN

## Surprises All Around, Some of Them Even Good

YOUR TYPICAL trip back home.

Golf-cart rides, trying to remember where we parked our warship, sailing into the treacherous mouth of an unknown river, getting sucked into rapids that shot us into the tunnels underneath Valhalla, jumping off a moving ship and watching the *Big Banana* disappear into the darkness, no doubt on its way to pick up the next lucky group of adventurers bound for glory, death, and Ragnarok-postponing shenanigans.

The other einherjar welcomed us as heroes and carried us to the feast hall for a big celebration. There we found that Helgi had arranged a special surprise for Samirah, thanks to a tip-off from Odin himself. Standing by our regular table, looking very confused, wearing a name tag around his neck that proclaimed VISITOR. MORTAL! DO NOT KILL! was Amir Fadlan.

He blinked several times when he saw Sam. “I—I am so confused. Are you real?”

Samirah tented her hands over her face. Her eyes teared up. “Oh. I’m real. I so want to hug you right now.”

Alex gestured at the crowds pouring in for dinner. “You’d better not. Since we’re all your extended family here, you’ve got several thousand heavily armed male chaperones present.”

I realized Alex was including himself in that group. At some point during the voyage home, he had shifted to male.

“This is...” Amir looked around in wonder. “Sam, this is where you work?”

Samirah made a sound somewhere between a laugh and a joyful sob. “Yes, my love. Yes, it is. And it’s Eid al-Fitr, isn’t it?”

Amir nodded. "Our families are planning dinner together tonight. Right now, I didn't know if you would be free to—"

"Yes!" Samirah turned to me. "Would you give my apologies to the thanes?"

"No apologies necessary," I assured her. "Does this mean Ramadan is over?"

"Yes!"

I grinned. "Sometime this week, I am taking you out for lunch. We're going to eat in the sunlight and laugh and laugh."

"Deal!" She spread her arms. "Air hug."

"Air hug," I agreed.

Alex smirked. "Looks like they'll need me for chaperone duty, if you all will excuse me."

I didn't want to excuse him, but I didn't have much choice. Sam, Amir, and Alex rushed off to celebrate Eid and eat massive quantities of tasty food.

For the rest of us, the evening was all about drinking mead, getting patted on the back a few thousand times, and hearing the thanes give speeches about how great we were, even if the quality of heroes was *much* better back in their day. Above, in the branches of the Tree of Laeradr, squirrels and wombats and tiny deer ran around as usual. Valkyries zipped here and there serving food and mead.

Toward the end of the feast, Thomas Jefferson Jr. tried to teach us some of his old marching songs from the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts. Halfborn Gunderson and Mallory Keen alternately threw plates at each other and rolled around in the aisles, kissing, while the other Vikings laughed at them. It made my heart glad to see them together again...though it also made me feel a little empty.

Blitzen and Hearthstone had become such fixtures in Valhalla that Helgi announced they were being made honorary hotel guests, free to come and go as they pleased, though he made a point of saying they did not have rooms, or minibar keys, or any sort of immortality, so they should act accordingly and avoid flying projectiles. Blitz and Hearth were given large helmets that said HONORARY EINHERJI, which they didn't look too happy about.

As the party was breaking up, Blitzen clapped me on the back, which was sore from all the other clapping that my back had received that night.

“We’re heading out, kid. Gotta get some sleep.”

“You guys sure?” I asked. “Everybody is heading to the after-party. We’re doing a tug-of-war over a lake of chocolate.”

*Sounds fun,* Hearthstone signed. *But we will see you tomorrow. Yes?*

I knew what he was asking: Was I really serious about following through with my plan—the favor I’d asked Odin?

“Yeah,” I promised. “Tomorrow it is.”

Blitz grinned. “You’re a good man, Magnus. This is going to be awesome!”

The tug-of-war was fun, though our side lost. I think that’s because Hunding was our anchor and he wanted to bathe in chocolate.

At the end of the night, exhausted, happy, and doused in Hershey’s syrup, I staggered back to my room. As I passed Alex Fierro’s door, I stopped for a moment and listened, but I heard nothing. He was probably still out enjoying Eid al-Fitr with Sam and Amir. I hoped they were having a great celebration. They’d earned it.

I stumbled into my room. I stood in the foyer, dripping chocolate all over the carpet. Luckily, the hotel had great magical clean-up service. I remembered the first time I’d entered this room, the day I died falling off the Longfellow Bridge. I had stared in wonder at all the amenities—the kitchen, the library, the couch and big-screen TV, the big atrium with the starry night sky twinkling through the tree branches.

Now there were more photos on the mantel. One or two magically appeared every week. Some were old pictures of my family: my mom, Annabeth, even Uncle Randolph and his kids and wife during happier times. But there were also newer pictures—me with my friends from floor nineteen, a photo I’d taken with Blitz and Hearth when we were still homeless. We’d borrowed somebody’s camera to do a group selfie. How the Hotel Valhalla had retrieved that shot from the ether, I didn’t know. Maybe Heimdall kept a cloud library of all selfies ever taken.

For the first time, I realized that walking into this room felt like coming home. I might not live at the hotel forever. In fact, I’d just had lunch that afternoon at the place where I would probably die someday. Still...this felt like a good place to hang my sword.

Speaking of which...I took off my neck chain, careful not to wake up Jack, and set his runestone pendant on the coffee table. He hummed contentedly in his sleep, probably dreaming of Percy’s sword Riptide and

all the other weapons he had loved. I wasn't sure how I was going to locate the god Bragi and get him to write an epic about Jack, but that was a problem for another day.

I'd just pulled off my sticky chocolate-soaked shirt when a voice behind me said, "You might want to close the door before you start changing."

I turned.

Alex leaned against the door frame, his arms crossed over his chain mail sweater vest, his pink glasses low on his nose. He shook his head in disbelief. "Did you lose a mud-wrestling contest?"

"Uh." I looked down. "It's chocolate."

"Okay. I'm not going to ask."

"How was Eid?"

Alex shrugged. "Fine, I guess. A lot of happy people partying. Lots of food and music. Relatives hugging each other. Not really my scene."

"Right."

"I left Sam and Amir in good company with their whole families. They looked...Happy doesn't cover it. Delighted? Ecstatic?"

"Head over heels?" I suggested. "Over the moon?"

Alex met my eyes. "Yeah. That works."

*Drip. Drip.* Chocolate dribbled from my fingertips in a completely suave and attractive way.

"So, anyway," Alex said. "I was thinking about your proposal."

My throat constricted. I wondered if I had a chocolate allergy I didn't know about, and I was dying in a new and interesting manner.

"My what?" I squeaked.

"About the mansion," he clarified. "What did you *think* I meant?"

"No, of course. The proposal about the mansion. Absolutely."

"I guess I'm in," he said. "When do we start?"

"Uh, great! Tomorrow we can do the initial walk-through. I'll get the keys. Then we wait for the lawyers to do their thing. Maybe a couple of weeks?"

"Perfect. Now go take a shower. You're disgusting. I'll see you at breakfast."

"Okay."

He turned to leave, then hesitated. "One more thing."

He walked up to me. "I've also been thinking about your declaration of undying love or whatever."

“I didn’t—it wasn’t—”

He clamped his hands on the sides of my gooey face and kissed me.

I had to wonder: Was it possible to dissolve into chocolate on a molecular level and melt into a puddle on the carpet? Because that’s how I felt. I’m pretty sure Valhalla had to resurrect me several times during the course of that kiss. Otherwise, I don’t know how I was still in one piece when Alex finally pulled away.

He studied me critically, his brown and amber eyes taking me in. He had a chocolate mustache and goatee now, and chocolate down the front of his sweater vest.

I’ll be honest. A small part of my brain thought, *Alex is male right now. I have just been kissed by a dude. How do I feel about that?*

The rest of my brain answered: *I have just been kissed by Alex Fierro. I am absolutely great with that.*

In fact, I might have done something typically embarrassing and stupid, like making the aforementioned declaration of undying love, but Alex spared me.

“Eh.” He shrugged. “I’ll keep thinking about it. I’ll get back to you. In the meantime, definitely take that shower.”

He left, whistling a tune that might have been a Frank Sinatra song from the elevator, “Fly Me to the Moon.”

I’m great at following orders. I went to take a shower.



## The Chase Space Becomes a Place

ODIN'S LAWYERS were good.

In two weeks, all the paperwork was done. Odin had to wrangle with various Boston zoning commissions, the mayor's office, and several neighborhood associations, but he'd cleared those hurdles in record time, as only a god with infinite money and a background in motivational speaking could. Uncle Randolph's will had been fully executed. Annabeth had cheerfully signed off.

"I think this is *awesome*, Magnus," she said on the phone from California. "You are amazing. I—I kind of needed some good news right now."

That set my ears buzzing. Why did Annabeth sound like she'd been crying?

"You okay, cuz?"

She paused for a long time. "I will be. We...we got some bad news when we got out here."

I waited. She didn't elaborate. I didn't push. She would tell me if and when she wanted to. Still, I wished I could pull her through the phone and give her a hug. Now that she was on the other coast, I wondered when I would see her again. Did einherjar ever make it out to the West Coast? I'd have to ask Samirah.

"Percy okay?" I asked.

"Yeah, he's fine," she said. "Well...as fine as can be expected."

I heard his muffled voice in the background.

"He wants to know if any of his advice helped you on the sea voyage," Annabeth relayed.

“Absolutely,” I said. “Tell him I kept my butt clenched the entire trip, just like he said.”

That got a broken laugh. “I’ll tell him.”

“Take care of yourself.”

She drew a shaky breath. “I will. You, too. We’ll talk more next time I see you.”

That gave me hope. There would be a next time. Whatever was going on in my cousin’s life, whatever bad news she was dealing with, at least my friends and I had won her and Percy a reprieve from Ragnarok. I hoped they would have a chance at happiness.

I said my good-byes and got back to work.

In two more weeks, the Chase Mansion was open for business.

Our first guests moved in on July Fourth, Independence Day. It had taken Alex and me several days to convince them that our offer was serious and not some sort of scam.

*We know where you’re at, Alex told these kids. We’ve been homeless, too. You can stay for as long or as little time as you want. No judgment. No expectations. Just mutual respect, okay?*

They came in, wide-eyed and shaking with hunger, and they stayed. We didn’t advertise our presence in the neighborhood. We didn’t make a big deal out of it. We certainly didn’t rub it in the neighbors’ faces. But in the legal documents, the mansion was called the Chase Space, a residence for homeless youth.

Blitzen and Hearthstone moved in. They served as cooks, tailors, and life advisors for the kids. Hearth taught them sign language. Blitz let the kids work in his shop, Blitzen’s Best, which was right down the street and had reopened just in time for the high shopping season.

Alex and I went back and forth between Valhalla and the mansion, helping out, recruiting new kids. Some stayed a long time. Some didn’t. Some only wanted a sandwich or pocket money or a bed for the night. They disappeared the next morning. That was okay. No judgment.

Occasionally, I’d pass one of the bedrooms and find Alex with her arm around some new kid who was crying his or her eyes out for the first time in years; Alex just being there, listening, understanding.

She'd look up, then motion with her head for me to keep moving, like *Give me some space, Chase.*

That first day we were open, the Fourth of July, we had a party for our guests on the roof deck. Blitzen and Hearthstone grilled hamburgers and hot dogs. The kids hung out with us, watching the fireworks explode over the Hatch Shell on the Esplanade, lights crackling through the low clouds and washing the Back Bay brownstones in red and blue.

Alex and I reclined next to each other in the lounge chairs, where we'd sat after killing the wolf in Randolph's library weeks before.

She reached over and took my hand.

She hadn't done that since we were marching invisibly toward the Ship of the Dead. I didn't question the gesture. I didn't take it for granted. I decided just to enjoy it. You have to do that with Alex. She is all about change. Moments don't last. You've got to enjoy each one for what it is.

"This is good," she said.

I didn't know if she meant what we'd accomplished with Chase Space, or the fireworks, or holding hands, but I agreed. "Yeah. It is."

I thought about what might come next. Our jobs as einherjar were never over. Until Ragnarok, we would always have more quests to undertake, more battles to fight. And I still had to find the god Bragi and convince him to write Jack his epic.

Also, I'd learned enough about othala to know that your inheritance never leaves you alone. Just as Hearthstone had had to revisit Alfheim, I had difficult things still to deal with. Chief among them: that dark road to Helheim, the voices of my dead relatives, my mom calling to me. Hel had promised that I would see my mom again someday. Loki had threatened that the spirits of my family would suffer for what I had done to him. Eventually, I would have to seek out the frozen land of the dead and see for myself.

But for now, we had fireworks. We had our friends, new and old. I had Alex Fierro next to me, holding my hand.

It might stop at any moment. We einherjar know we are destined to die. The world *will* end. The big picture cannot be changed. But in the meantime, as Loki once said, we can choose to alter the details. That's how we take control of our destiny.

Sometimes, even Loki can be right.



## GLOSSARY

AEGIR—lord of the waves

AESIR—gods of war, close to humans

ALLAHU akbar—God is greater

ARGR—Norse for *unmanly*

BALDER—an Aesir god, son of Odin and Frigg, brother of many, including Thor; he was so handsome, gracious, and cheerful that he gave off light

BERSERKER—a Norse warrior frenzied in battle and considered invulnerable

BIFROST—the rainbow bridge leading from Asgard to Midgard

BOLVERK—an alias used by Odin

BRAGI—god of poetry

BRUNNMIGI—a being who urinates into wells

CAILLEACH—Gaelic for *witch* or *hag*

DRAUGR—Norse zombies

EID al-fitr—a holiday celebrated by Muslims to mark the end of Ramadan

EINHERJAR (EINHERJI, sing.)—great heroes who have died with bravery on Earth; soldiers in Odin’s eternal army; they train in Valhalla for Ragnarok, when the bravest of them will join Odin against Loki and the giants in the battle at the end of the world

EINVIGI—Norse for *single combat*

ELDHUSFIFL—Norse for *village idiot*

FARBAUTI—the jotun husband of Laufey and father of Loki

FENRIS WOLF—an invulnerable wolf born of Loki’s affair with a giantess; his mighty strength strikes fear even in the gods, who keep him tied to a rock on an island. He is destined to break free on the day of Ragnarok.

FLYTING—a verbal duel of insults, in which the contestants must display prestige, power, and confidence

FREY—the god of spring and summer; the sun, the rain, and the harvest; abundance and fertility; growth and vitality. Frey is the twin brother of Freya and, like his sister, is associated with great beauty. He is lord of Alfheim.

FREYA—the goddess of love; twin sister of Frey

FRIGG—goddess of marriage and motherhood; Odin’s wife and the queen of Asgard; mother of Balder and Hod

GARM—the guard dog of Hel

GINNUNGAGAP—the primordial void; a mist that obscures appearances

GJALLAR—Heimdall’s horn

GLAMOUR—illusion magic

GROVE OF GLASIR—trees in the realm of Asgard, outside the doors of Valhalla, with golden red leaves. *Glasir* means *gleaming*.

HALAL—meat prepared as required by Muslim law

HEIMDALL—god of vigilance and the guardian of Bifrost, the gateway to Asgard

HEL—goddess of the dishonorable dead; born of Loki’s affair with a giantess

HELHEIM—the underworld, ruled by Hel and inhabited by those who died in wickedness, old age, or illness

HRUNGNIR—brawler

HUGINN AND MUNINN—Odin’s ravens, whose names mean *thought* and *memory*, respectively

HULDER—a domesticated forest sprite

IDUN—a beautiful goddess of youth, who supplies the other gods and goddesses with apples of immortality

INSHALLAH—God willing

JORMUNGAND—the World Serpent, born of Loki’s affair with a giantess; his body is so long it wraps around the earth

JOTUN—giant

KENAZ—the torch, the fire of life

KONUNGSGURTHA—Norse for *king’s court*

KVASIR—a man created from the spit of the Aesir and Vanir gods, to represent the peace treaty between them after their war

KVASIR’s Mead—a drink that grants the gift of oration, created from a combination of Kvasir’s blood and honey

LAUFNEY—the jotun wife of Farbauti and mother of Loki

LINDWORM—a fearsome dragon the size and length of an eighteen-wheeler, with just two front legs and leathery brown bat-type wings too small for effective flight

LOKI—god of mischief, magic, and artifice; the son of two giants, Farbauti and Laufey; adept with magic and shape-shifting. He is alternately

malicious and heroic to the Asgardian gods and to humankind. Because of his role in the death of Balder, Loki was chained by Odin to three giant boulders with a poisonous serpent coiled over his head. The venom of the snake occasionally irritates Loki's face, and his writhing can cause earthquakes.

**MAGHRIB PRAYER**—the fourth of five formal daily prayers performed by practicing Muslims, prayed just after sunset

**MEINFRETR**—stinkfart

**MIKILLGULR**—Norse for *big yellow*

**MIMIR**—an Aesir god who, along with Honir, traded places with Vanir gods Frey and Njord at the end of the war between the Aesir and the Vanir. When the Vanir didn't like his counsel, they cut off his head and sent it to Odin. Odin placed the head in a magical well, where the water brought it back to life, and Mimir soaked up all the knowledge of the World Tree.

**MINIÉ ball**—a type of bullet used in muzzle-loading rifles during the Civil War

**MJÖÐ**—Norse for *mead*

**MJOLNIR**—Thor's hammer

**NAGLFAR**—the Ship of Nails

**NJORD**—Vanir god of the sea, father of Frey and Freya

**NØKK**—a nixie, or water spirit

**NORNS**—three sisters who control the destinies of both gods and humans.

**ODIN**—the “All-Father” and king of the gods; the god of war and death, but also poetry and wisdom. By trading one eye for a drink from the Well of Wisdom, Odin gained unparalleled knowledge. He has the ability to observe all the Nine Worlds from his throne in Asgard; in addition to his great hall, he also resides in Valhalla with the bravest of those slain in battle.

**OTHALA**—inheritance

**QURANIC**—something relating or belonging to the Quran, the central religious text of Islam

**RAGNAROK**—the Day of Doom or Judgment, when the bravest of the einherjar will join Odin against Loki and the giants in the battle at the end of the world

**RAMADAN**—a time for spiritual purification achieved through fasting, self-sacrifice, and prayers, celebrated in the ninth month of the Islamic calendar

**RAN**—goddess of the sea; wife of Aegir

**RED gold**—the currency of Asgard and Valhalla

SIF—goddess of the earth; mother of Uller by her first husband; Thor is her second husband; the rowan is her sacred tree

SIGYN—Loki's wife

SKADI—an ice giantess once married to Njord

SKALDS—poets who composed at the courts of leaders during the Viking Age

SLEIPNIR—Odin's eight-legged steed; only Odin can summon him; one of Loki's children

SUHUR—the pre-dawn meal eaten by practicing Muslims during Ramadan

SUMARBRANDER—the Sword of Summer

THANE—a lord of Valhalla

THOR—god of thunder; son of Odin. Thunderstorms are the earthly effects of Thor's mighty chariot rides across the sky, and lightning is caused by hurling his great hammer, Mjolnir.

THRALL—a slave, servant, or captive

THRYM—king of the jotun

THRYMHEIMR—Thunder Home

TREE OF LAERADR—a tree in the center of the Feast Hall of the Slain in Valhalla containing immortal animals that have particular jobs

TVEIRVIGI—double combat

TYR—god of courage, law, and trial by combat; he lost a hand to Fenris's bite when the Wolf was restrained by the gods

UTGARD-LOKI—the most powerful sorcerer of Jotunheim; king of the mountain giants

VALHALLA—paradise for warriors in the service of Odin

VALKYRIE—Odin's handmaidens who choose slain heroes to bring to Valhalla

VANIR—gods of nature; close to elves

VATNAVAETTIR (*each-uisce* in Ireland)—water horses

VIGRIDR—a plain that will be the site of the battle between the gods and Surt's forces during Ragnarok

VILI AND VE—the two younger brothers of Odin, who, together with him, shared a role in the shaping of the cosmos and are the first of the Aesir. When Odin was abroad for a long time, Vili and Ve ruled in his stead, alongside Frigg.

WERGILD—blood debt

WYRD—fate

Ymir—the ancestor of all gods and jotun



## PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

AEGIR	<i>AY-gear</i>
AESIR	<i>AY-ser</i>
ALF SEIDR	<i>ALF SAY-der</i>
ALFHEIM	<i>ALF-haym</i>
ARGR	<i>ARR-ger</i>
ASGARD	<i>AZ-gahrrd</i>
BALDER	<i>BALL-der</i>
BAUGI	<i>BAW-ghee</i>
BIFROST	<i>BEE-frrohst</i>
BLODUGHADDA	<i>BLODE-oug-hadda</i>
BOLVERK	<i>BOLE-verrk</i>
BRAGI	<i>BRRAAG-ee</i>
BYLGYA	<i>BOOL-ghooa</i>
CAILLEACH	<i>KAL-ee-yucck</i>
DAGAZ	<i>DAH-gahz</i>
DRAUGR	<i>DRRAW-ger</i>
DUFA	<i>DOO-vah</i>
EHWAZ	<i>AY-wahz</i>
EINHERJAR/EINHERJI	<i>in-HAIRR-yar/in-HAIRR-yee</i>
EINVIGI	<i>AYN-vee-gee</i>
ELDHUSFIFL	<i>EL-doos-feef-full</i>
ELDIR	<i>el-DEER</i>
FARBAUTI	<i>fahrr-BAW-tee</i>
FEHU	<i>FAY-hoo</i>
FENRIS	<i>FEHN-rrihss</i>
FIMAFENG	<i>FEE-ma-vehng</i>
FJALAR	<i>fee-YALL-ar</i>

FLÄM	<i>FLAHM</i>
FREY	<i>FRRAY</i>
FREYA	<i>FRRAY-uh</i>
FRIGG	<i>FRRIHG</i>
GARM	<i>GAHRRM</i>
GINNUNGAGAP	<i>GEEN-un-guh-gahp</i>
GJALAR	<i>gee-YALL-ar</i>
GJALLAR	<i>gee-YALL-ar</i>
GLASIR	<i>gla-SEER</i>
GUNLOD	<i>GOON-lode</i>
HAGALAZ	<i>HA-ga-lahts</i>
HEFRING	<i>HEV-rring</i>
HEIMDALL	<i>HAME-doll</i>
HEL	<i>HEHL</i>
HELGI	<i>HEL-ghee</i>
HELHEIM	<i>HEHL-haym</i>
HIMMINGLAEVA	<i>HEEM-meen-glah-vah</i>
HRÖNN	<i>HRRONE</i>
HYRDM	<i>HRRIM</i>
HUGINN	<i>HOO-gihn</i>
HULDER	<i>HOOL-dihrl</i>
HUNDING	<i>HOON-deeng</i>
HRUNGNIR	<i>HRROONG-neer</i>
HUSVAETTR	<i>HOOS-veht-tr</i>
IDUN	<i>ee-DOON</i>
ISA	<i>EES-ah</i>
JORMUNGAND	<i>YOHRR-mun-gand</i>
JORVIK	<i>YOHRR-vick</i>
JOTUN	<i>YOH-toon</i>
JOTUNHEIM	<i>YOH-tuhn-haym</i>
KENAZ	<i>KEH-nahtz</i>
KOLGA	<i>KOLE-gah</i>

KONUNGSGURTHA	<i>KO-noongs-goorr-tha</i>
KVASIR	<i>ki-VAH-seer</i>
LAERADR	<i>LAY-rrah-dur</i>
LAUFY	<i>LAW-fay</i>
LAGAZ	<i>lah-GAHTS</i>
LINDWORM	<i>LIHND-wohrrm</i>
LOKI	<i>LOH-kee</i>
MEINFRETR	<i>MAYN-frih-ter</i>
MIDGARD	<i>MIHD-gahrrd</i>
MIKILLGULR	<i>MEE-keel-goo-ler</i>
MIMIR	<i>MEE-meer</i>
MJÖÐ	<i>mee-YOTH</i>
MJOLNIR	<i>MEE’OHL-neer</i>
MOKKERKALFE	<i>MOKE-kerr-kal-feh</i>
MUNDR	<i>MOON-der</i>
MUNINN	<i>MOON-in</i>
MUSPELL	<i>MOO-spel</i>
MUSPELLHEIM	<i>MOOS-pehl-haym</i>
NAGLFAR	<i>NAHG’L-fahr</i>
NIDAVELLIR	<i>Nee-duh-vehl-EER</i>
NIDHOGG	<i>NEED-hawg</i>
NIFLHEIM	<i>NIHF-uh-haym</i>
NJORD	<i>nee-YORD</i>
NØKK	<i>NAWK</i>
NORNS	<i>NOHRRNZ</i>
ODIN	<i>OH-dihn</i>
OTHALA	<i>OH-thal-ah</i>
RAGNAROK	<i>RAG-nuh-rrawk</i>
RAN	<i>RAN</i>
SAMIRAH AL-ABBAS	<i>sah-MEER-ah ahl-AH-bahss</i>
SIF	<i>SEEV</i>
SIGYN	<i>SEE-goon</i>

SKADI	<i>SKAH-dee</i>
SKALD	<i>SKAHLD</i>
SLEIPNIR	<i>SLAYP-neer</i>
SUMARBRANDER	<i>SOO-marr-brrand-der</i>
SUTTUNG	<i>SOOT-toong</i>
THIJASSI	<i>thee-YAH-see</i>
THOR	<i>THORE</i>
THRALL	<i>THRAWL</i>
THRYM	<i>THRRIMM</i>
THRYMHEIMR	<i>THRIM-haym-eer</i>
THRYNGA	<i>THRRIN-gah</i>
THURISAZ	<i>THOORR-ee-sahts</i>
TIWAZ	<i>TEE-vahz</i>
TVEIRVIGI	<i>tih-VAIR-vee-gee</i>
TYR	<i>TEER</i>
ULLER	<i>OO-lir</i>
UNN	<i>OON</i>
URNES	<i>OORR-nis</i>
URUZ	<i>OOR-oots</i>
UTGARD-LOKI	<i>OOT-gahrrd-LOH-kee</i>
VALHALLA	<i>Val-HAHL-uh</i>
VALKYRIE	<i>VAL-kerr-ee</i>
VANAHEIM	<i>VAN-uh-haym</i>
VANIR	<i>Vah-NEER</i>
VATNAVAETTIR	<i>vat-na-VAHT-teer</i>
VE	<i>VEH</i>
VIDAR	<i>VEE-dar</i>
VIGRIDR	<i>VEE-gree-der</i>
VILI	<i>VEE-lee</i>
WERGILD	<i>WIRR-gild</i>
WIGHT	<i>WHITE</i>
WYRD	<i>WOORD</i>

YGGDRASIL  
YMIR

*IHG-drruh-sihl*  
*EE-meer*

## THE NINE WORLDS

ASGARD—the home of the Aesir

VANAHEIM—the home of the Vanir

ALFHEIM—the home of the light elves

MIDGARD—the home of humans

JOTUNHEIM—the home of the giants

NIDAVELLIR—the home of the dwarves

NIFLHEIM—the world of ice, fog, and mist

MUSPELLHEIM—the home of the fire giants and demons

HELHEIM—the home of Hel and the dishonorable dead

## RUNES (IN ORDER OF MENTION)

LAGAZ—water, liquefy



FEHU—the rune of Frey



OTHALA—inheritance



GEBO—gift



RAIDHO—traveling



KENAZ—the torch



ISA—ice



EHWAZ—horse, transportation

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THURISAZ—the rune of Thor

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HOTEL VALHALLA

## GUIDE TO THE NORSE WORLDS

YOUR INTRODUCTION  
TO DEITIES,  
MYTHICAL BEINGS &  
FANTASTIC CREATURES

 • HYPERION  
Los Angeles New York

AN OFFICIAL RICK RIORDAN COMPANION BOOK

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*For all einherjar*

*May you prove worthy of Valhalla*



HOTEL VALHALLA

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## *A Word from the Manager*

Dear Valued Guest,

On behalf of the staff, welcome to Hotel Valhalla. We recognize that there were other options for your afterlife. We thank you for the selfless sacrifice that landed you here among Odin's chosen warriors instead of elsewhere.

You will encounter many powerful deities, magical beings, and fantastic creatures as an *einherji*. You may have questions about them. You may decide to ask me those questions. In fact, if more than a millennium of experience is any indication, you *will* ask me. Of course, as manager of this fine establishment, I'll be happy to answer them. But I'll be even happier if you consult this guide before you ring the front desk. I do have a hotel to run, after all.

With insightful interviews and scintillating stories, insider information and random remarks, this book allows you to explore the lives of our worlds' inhabitants from the comfort of your room. As you read, you may wish to ponder the possibility of your own heroic tale finding a page in future editions of this book.\* Will your deeds earn you a coveted seat at the thanes' table, or will they be less than satisfactory, securing your role as servant to those who answer Odin's call? If the former, I will be the first to welcome you, for I myself am a thane. If the latter, please confer with Hunding the bellhop about your duties.

For now, though, sit back, relax, and enjoy your ongoing death, your daily resurrection, and your everlasting stay here.

—Helgi  
MANAGER OF HOTEL  
VALHALLA SINCE 749 C.E.



# WHAT IN THE WORLDS?

by Hunding

HOTEL VALHALLA BELLHOP SINCE 749 C.E.

To be honest, I'm not great with words, so I wasn't keen on writing anything for this book. But Helgi told me to, and I have to do what Helgi tells me, because—well, that's a story for another time. Maybe someday I'll write it down. But probably not.

I'm supposed to tell you where we live. We live in a tree. It's a really, really big tree called *Yggdrasil*. It has a name because it's important, and all important things have names. I don't know who named it. Come to think of it, I don't know who named anything. Is there a god for that?

*Yggdrasil* is also known as the World Tree. Not only is that easier to pronounce, it's a spot-on description, because the branches hold nine—count 'em, *nine*—worlds: *Asgard*, *Vanaheim*, *Midgard*, *Alfheim*, *Jotunheim*, *Nidavellir*, *Muspellheim*, *Niflheim*, and *Helheim*. When I first joined the hotel staff, I had trouble remembering their names. So I came up with this handy mnemonic device: A Very Mean Ant Just Nibbled My Nose Hair. A stands for *Asgard*, V for *Vanaheim*, and so on. Get it? You can use my special sentence if you want. Just leave me chocolate in return.

Now, a little bit about each world:

**ASGARD:** This is the realm of the *Aesir*, warrior gods and goddesses. These deities—*Odin*, *Thor*, and *Frigg*, among others—reside in palaces made of silver, gold, and other precious materials. Hotel *Valhalla*, the beloved afterlife residence of the *einherjar*, the soldiers in Odin's eternal army, is within this world.

**VANAHEIM:** Home of the *Vanir*, the nature gods and goddesses, this world is warm and sunny, filled with lush green meadowland. *Folkvanger*, the flower-child afterlife equivalent of Valhalla, is within this realm. The *Vanir*

goddess *Freya* rules over Folkvanger from her palace *Sessrumnir*, or Hall of Many Seats, which is an upside-down ship crafted of gold and silver.

MIDGARD: If you are human, this is where you once lived. Midgard rests in Yggdrasil's branches and is connected to Asgard via the *Bifrost*, a massive bridge constructed from a single rainbow. The city of Boston, Massachusetts, is very close to Yggdrasil's trunk, making it a useful point of entry to and exit from the other worlds.

ALFHEIM: The home of the light elves, Alfheim resembles Midgard in many ways except that elves, not humans, live here, and there is no night. The Vanir god *Frey* rules over it. Alfheim is kind of an upscale neighborhood, so be on your best behavior if you visit. Otherwise you might get arrested for loitering, or trespassing, or just...you know, not being an elf.

JOTUNHEIM: The world of the giants, or *jotun*, is primarily mountainous, with great drifts of snow, half-frozen rivers and lakes, and, well, giants. Giants are large and not particularly careful about where they step. Be cautious traveling in Jotunheim. I've had more than one friend flattened under a giant's boot.

NIDAVELLIR: The underground realm of the dwarves, this world is chilly and dark because the only natural light comes from a special glowing moss. The buildings are equally gloomy, though the furnishings within are one-of-a-kind creations, for dwarves are master craftsmen. If you want to pick up a souvenir, like a magic hammer or a foldable boat, be prepared to pay handsomely. Dwarves take gold, all major credit cards, and your head (if you lose a wager with them). One section of Nidavellir is called *Svartalfheim*, the land of the "dark elves," but this isn't really a separate world, and the svartalfs aren't actually elves. They are dwarves who have some Vanir blood since they descended from Freya. (Long story. Freya doesn't like to talk about it.)

MUSPELLHEIM: This is the land where fire giants and demons dwell. Imagine the surface of the sun, populated with angry, heavily armed burning people. *Surt*, the lord of the fire giants, rules this world and doesn't appreciate visitors. Best to steer clear.

NIFLHEIM: An inhospitable, frigid region of mist, ice, and fog, it is where the frost giants often reside. Great place to make an ice sculpture or store meat if you run out of room in your freezer. However, since high summer temperatures hover at around –30 degrees Fahrenheit, I’d wear your warmies.

HELHEIM: The dead who don’t go to Valhalla or Folkvanger end up here. It’s a cold, dark, lifeless place, full of miserable souls who died of old age or sickness. To get there, you have to ride down an icy road into the pitch-black Valley of Death, cross the River Gjoll on an iron bridge guarded by a giantess, somehow get across the Wall of Corpses, and finally arrive at the Hall of *Hel*, the goddess of the dishonorable dead, where you’ll be served famine, hunger, and misery for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Suffice to say, Helheim rarely makes it on the list of top vacation spots for the Nine Worlds.

A few other points of interest: At the roots of Yggdrasil is a magical well of knowledge, overseen by the ancient god *Mimir* (or at least Mimir’s head, because that’s all that’s left of him). Drink from the well, and you can learn important stuff. You have to pay Mimir for the drink, though, and the price isn’t cheap. Just ask Odin. (But I’d wait until he’s in a good mood before asking.)

Travel among the worlds is allowed, though some restrictions may apply. There’s one place you shouldn’t visit, however, and that’s the massive abyss of nothingness called *Ginnungagap*. True story: Long ago, before anything was anything, frost from Niflheim spread into Ginnungagap and met with fire coming from Muspellheim. No big surprise, the frost melted. Some drops turned into a humungous giant named *Ymir*. A few generations later, Odin and his brothers *Vili* and *Ve* killed Ymir and turned his body parts into Midgard’s oceans, sky, earth, and plants. Ever since then, the giants have hated the gods. Moral of the story: Avoid Ginnungagap. You just never know what might happen there.

# THE GODS AND GODDESSES

by Hunding

**M**e again. Did you think my contribution began and ended with the explanation of the Nine Worlds? Apparently, we were both wrong.

So, the gods and goddesses. These divine beings permeate all aspects of our cosmos. They belong to one of two tribes, the Aesir or the Vanir. The Aesir are warriors. They dwell in Asgard and handle most aspects of law and order—defending it in battle, maintaining it through their swift and often deadly system of justice, and, on occasion, disrupting it by means of pranks, tricks, and crimes. They cherish loyalty, honor, and a “fight for what’s right” sensibility above all else. (Except when they are engaged in pranks, tricks, and crimes.) A good time to be around the Aesir is on the battlefield. They will always have your back. A bad time to be around the Aesir is when they’re drinking mead together. Then the insults start flying, and wow—some of those Aesir insults can make your ears bleed.

The more peaceful Vanir oversee the nature side of things, such as fertility, the seasons, crop growth, and the like, from their home world of

Vanaheim. They appreciate groovy, laid-back calm and finely crafted macramé handbags.

The Vanir are not complete pacifists, however. Take the Aesir-Vanir war. According to historic accounts, it was triggered by a sorceress from Vanaheim, who some say was Freya herself. The witch traveled the worlds performing elf magic, or *alf seidr*. She put on a show in Asgard for Odin and the other gods. The Aesir were impressed with her powers until they realized she was using them for one purpose: to obtain their gold. (No offense, Freya, but your lust for gold is probably how the rumors about you being the sorceress got started.)

Her greed offended the Aesir. So they did the only logical thing: they burned her. Three times, actually. Each time, she popped out of the flames uncharred. Finally, though, she'd had enough. She returned to Vanaheim, posted a one-star rating for her stay in Asgard, and *boom*—war erupted.

No one knows how long the two tribes fought. But eventually both sides got sick and tired of it. They called a truce. To seal the deal, they did a deity hostage exchange—Freya, Frey, and their dad, *Njord* of Vanaheim, for Asgard's Mimir and *Honir*. I'd like to say that it all worked out fine, but I suspect Mimir would disagree since he got his head cut off for being sassy with the Vanir. And how Freya wound up back in Vanaheim in charge of Folkvanger is anyone's guess.

But that's the divine for you; they operate by their own set of rules. Speaking of which, read on to learn more about the Norse deities.



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## ODIN

**TYPE:** God

**HOME WORLD:** Asgard

**APPEARANCE:** A weathered warrior. Muscular and barrel-chested. Close-cropped gray hair and tidy, square-cut beard. Eye patch over left eye; right eye is deep blue. Exudes power and wisdom.

**FAMILY:** Married to the goddess Frigg and father of many sons, including the god *Balder*

**BEST KNOWN FOR:** Being the All-Father, king of the gods, the god of war and death, and of poetry and wisdom. Oversees Valhalla, where he receives half of those who die bravely in battle, the einherjar. Can shape-shift. Continually seeking new knowledge, and often consults the disembodied

head of the wise being Mimir for advice. Author of many books, including his latest, *Seven Heroic Qualities*.

**FAVORITE WEAPON:** Odin is frequently seen with his spear, *Gungnir*. (Told you everything important here has a name.)

**ANIMAL COMPANIONS:** Odin is often accompanied by the wolves *Geri* and *Freki* and the ravens *Huginn* and *Muninn*, who bring him information from all over Midgard. He rides the flying eight-legged steed *Sleipnir* across the sky and into the underworld.

## MY SIT-DOWN WITH ODIN

by Snorri Sturluson

RESIDENT OF HOTEL VALHALLA SINCE 1241 C.E.

As an author, historian, and sometime poet in life, and a *thane* in good standing in death, I've had the privilege of conversing with our deities many times over the last centuries. These chats became the basis of my book, *The Prose Edda* (available for purchase online and in better bookstores), which contains highly readable explanations of our most famous "myths" and insights about our celebrated heroes. When Helgi told me he was putting a guide to our worlds in every room of the hotel, I assumed he meant my *Edda*. But apparently he was looking for something with a more modern flair. He asked if I could recommend someone to interview our top-level gods and goddesses. No doubt he thought the task was beneath me, but I welcomed the opportunity for some one-on-one time with the deities. Naturally, my first conversation was with Odin, the All-Father himself. We met not at the High Seat *Hlidskjalf* as I'd suggested, but in an out-of-the-way, unassuming Midgard café.

[Editor's Note: Snorri Sturluson has had issues with accuracy in the past. To ensure this is not an issue with this and other interviews recorded in this book, a raven scribe accompanied him to his meetings. The transcripts therefore include impartial observations as well as the conversations themselves.]

SNORRI STURLUSON: Thank you, my lord, for agreeing to talk with me. I'm certain readers will be extremely interested in whatever you say.

ODIN: Probably.

SS: May I ask my first question?

O: You just did.

SS [laughing delightedly]: Oh, you got me that time! Wise and witty, all in one package! But now to the question. Odin, tell us, in your own words... what was it like when you lost your eye?

O [cheerfully]: I didn't lose it, Snorri. I gouged it out with my own fingers.

SS [looking green]: In...deed. And, erm, what was that like?

O: Not fun. But I got something worthwhile in exchange for it.

SS: And that was?

O: This cool eye patch.

SS: Ah. Nothing else?

O: Oh, I got a sip of water from the well of knowledge at Yggdrasil's roots, too. Mimir, the severed head, gave it to me himself.

SS [grandly]: And that was the first heroic step on your everlasting quest for wisdom!

O: Sure. [Scratches his beard thoughtfully.] Makes you wonder, though, doesn't it?

SS [leaning forward]: Wonder what, Lord Odin?

O: What Mimir did with my eye. [Shrugs.]

SS: A mystery that may never be solved. Speaking of mysteries, you once hanged yourself to gain wisdom. We're all dying to know—

O: "*Dying to know*"! Good one, Snorri!

SS: What? Oh. Yes, I see. So, can you tell us the story behind your hanging yourself for nine days to unlock the secret of runes?

O: Of course. [Pause.] I hanged myself for nine days to unlock the secret of runes.

SS: Yes, but why did you *hang* yourself?

O: To unlock the secret of runes.

SS: Er, yes. Fascinating.

O: But all that is ancient history, Snorri, as is the tale about how I stole and drank a vat of mead made from god spittle to become a poet.

SS [looking green]: God spittle.

O: Well, *technically*, the mead was made with honey and...well, let's call it a secret ingredient.\* [Winks.]

SS: Sounds delicious.

O: It was nauseating. I spat some out while soaring above Midgard. Drops of it are still down there. A few humans accidentally swallow it now and again. Those who do become world-renowned poets and scholars. [Cups hands and shouts toward Midgard.] Shakespeare, Longfellow, Silverstein—you're welcome!

SS: World-renowned poets and scholars, eh? [Chuckles in a self-deprecating manner.] You must think I had a taste of it myself!

O: That possibility has never once crossed my mind.

SS: Ah. Well. Ancient history, as you say. Perhaps you'd like to tell us about your latest quests for wisdom and knowledge instead?

O: I'd like to tell you many things, Snorri. But to answer your question: I've started a spoken-word poetry group with some of my einherjar. Performances every Thor's Day night in the Feast Hall of the Slain, with light *Saebrimnir* refreshments to follow. The *Norns* are scheduled to make a guest appearance soon, which should prove interesting. Also, I'm taking Zumba classes to understand why in My Name they're so popular. Finally, I'm researching the magical symbol known in Midgard as [taps first two fingers of right hand against the first two fingers of left hand] *hashtag*. From what I've gleaned, when combined with other words, *hashtag* has the power to distract the mind from more important matters. If I'm right, I'll make *hashtag* the subject of my next book. The working title is...wait for it... *Hashtag*.

SS: An inspired choice, Lord Odin.

O: Yes, I know.



Sadly, our interview came to an abrupt conclusion at this point. Odin was called away on a matter of great Aesir importance. He couldn't reveal the nature of the emergency, but I'm quite certain I heard the words *hammer* and *missing*.



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# THOR

**TYPE:** God

**HOME WORLD:** Asgard

**APPEARANCE:** Bulging tattooed biceps, mountainous shoulders, massive chest, and carrot-colored hair. Wears a rarely washed sleeveless leather jerkin and leather pants, a chain-mail vest, a magic belt, and iron gauntlets. His finger knuckles are also tattooed.

**FAMILY:** Thor sired many children; his favorite sons are *Magni* and *Modi*. He had other offspring with his wife, the goddess *Sif*.

**BEST KNOWN FOR:** Being the god of thunder. He has a weekday named after him. His creative cusswords and explosive farts are almost as legendary as his strength, with which he protects humankind. Binge-watches Midgard television procedurals in his spare time.

**FAVORITE WEAPON:** His mountain-crushing hammer, *Mjolnir*, which also has the ability to pick up Wi-Fi and broadcast television in high resolution. If he were ever to lose it, he'd miss out on his favorite shows. Oh, and also, the Nine Worlds would be in serious trouble. He has a staff made of giant-forged iron as a backup.

**ANIMAL COMPANIONS:** *Tanngnjóstr* (meaning “Teeth Grinder”; you can call him *Otis*) and *Tanngrisnr* (meaning “Snarler”; just use *Marvin*), two talking goats that can be killed, cooked, eaten, and then resurrected. Convenient when you are hungry while on the road.

## A HERO AND A HAMMER

by John Henry

RESIDENT OF HOTEL VALHALLA SINCE 1871 C.E.

**G**rowing up, I never suspected I was the son of the Norse god of thunder. Why would I? I was born in America—West Virginia, North Carolina, I'm not exactly sure where—’round about 1840 or so. Oh, did I mention? My mamma was a slave. That means I was a slave, too.

And my daddy? In my heart, he was the man my mamma was married to, the man who raised me and loved me like his own. But as it turns out, we weren't blood kin.

When I was born, Thor sent me an anonymous gift—*Mjolnir Junior*, a tiny version of his own hammer, though I didn't know what it was then. There was enough of him in me that I took to that hammer like a duck to water, which is to say I pounded the living daylights out of anything and everything. (I ate, farted, and snored like Thor, too. Still do. No cussing, though. My mamma raised me right.)

As I grew, so did that hammer. I reckon that should have been a clue that it was magic. But greater things were on my mind in those days. The Civil War, for one, and later, the end of slavery. I was in my twenties when I became a freeman. With my mamma's blessing in my ears and her kiss on

my forehead, I stuck my hammer in my belt and set off to make my way in the world.

I'd been traveling for a while when I met up with a man. Biggest fella I'd ever seen. Tall and wide, with tattooed arms the size of tree trunks and shoulders like granite. Matted red hair and a thick beard to match. One whiff of him, though, and I was ready to hightail it in the other direction. But something stopped me. He had a hammer in his hand. A hammer just like mine.



So I sat with him by his fire. We shared a meal of goat stew and a mug of a drink he called mead. (He called the stew Otis. I found out why when I got to Valhalla.) We traded stories. He told a whopper about some thief named *Thrym* who once stole his hammer. He played a trick on Thrym to get it back. Pretended to be the woman Thrym wanted to marry—bridal gown and all! Just before the ceremony, Thrym gave his “bride” the stolen hammer as a token of his love. Thor grabbed it and bashed Thrym in the head. Took out the groomsmen, the guests, and the cake, too.

You might think hearing that story would put me on guard. But for some reason, I trusted the big fella. And he trusted me. When I asked if I could try his hammer, he let out a snort of laughter punctuated with a colossal fart.  
“Be my guest!”

I passed out from the strain of trying to lift it. When I came to, he and his hammer were gone. But he left a note behind. Trouble is, back then, I couldn't read. So I just tucked the paper in my pocket.

Not long after, my hammering skill got me a job driving steel spikes for the railroad. Mile after mile, month after month, I pounded track into place. I was the best worker of all—until the day a smooth-talking, scar-faced

salesman rode into town. He was selling steam-powered drills he claimed were faster and stronger than any steel-driving man. I couldn't read, but I saw the writing on the wall. His machine was going to put me and plenty of others out of work.

I had no choice but to try to show him up. I bet him that, in one day's time, my hammer and I could lay more track, and through a mountain no less, than his machine. If he won, the railroad would buy his machines. If I won, he would leave and never come back. He took my bet.

That night, my redhead friend showed up at my tent. "John Henry," he said, "I know this salesman. He's a [expletives deleted] trickster, and [expletives deleted] tricksters don't play fair. So I'm going to lend you something to even the odds."

He took off his belt and looped it around my waist. The minute it touched my skin, power surged through my veins. He laid his hammer in my hands. This time, I wielded it with ease.

At dawn, I strode toward the tunnel. That scar-faced salesman raised an eyebrow when he saw the hammer. "Well," he said, "this just got interesting."

Here's what happened next: We competed. I won. And then I died. I landed here in Valhalla with the hammer in my hand—and the redhead man's note in my pocket. A pretty lady on a strange smoky-looking horse read it to me:

*This man is my son. Treat him right. If you don't, I'll bash your heads in.*

It was signed *Thor*. And that's how I learned who my real daddy was.



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## LOKI

**TYPE:** God, born of two giants

**HOME WORLD:** Asgard

**APPEARANCE:** Messy hair in shades of red, yellow, and brown. Handsome except for a horribly scarred face and lips marred by pierce holes.

**FAMILY:** The father of Hel; *Fenris Wolf*; the World Serpent, *Jormungand*; *Narvi* and *Vali*, among others. The mother of the eight-legged steed, *Sleipnir*. (How's *that* for dysfunctional?)

**BEST KNOWN FOR:** Being a trickster, magician, and shape-shifter. This smooth-talker is very dangerous. Currently, as punishment for engineering the death of the god Balder, he is lashed to boulders and tortured by venom dripping onto his face from a serpent's mouth. Still, he somehow manages to get around and cause trouble throughout the worlds.

# DEALING WITH A DEAL-BREAKER

by *Brokkr the Dwarf*

**T**hat *Loki*, he's some kind of handsome, huh? Until you see the scars on his face and the little pinholes above and below his lips. Betcha don't know how he got those holes. Cop a seat on that boulder, and I'll tell you about it.

So *Loki*, one day he's bored. He breaks into Thor's place to muck around with the thunder god's stuff. Not too smart, if you ask me. Anyway, Thor's not home, but his wife, *Sif*, is. Now *Sif*, she's this gorgeous platinum blonde. Well, not platinum so much as gold. Real pretty hair, though, and wicked long. *Loki* sneaks up behind her with a knife. She doesn't hear him, because she's asleep. He cuts off her hair, which was a rotten thing to do on account of she was so proud of it.

She wakes up, sees she's pretty much bald, and starts crying her eyes out. Who walks in then, but Thor. Let me tell you, he's not the brightest coal in the kiln, if you get my drift. But even he can make out what's got *Sif* all upset. I mean, *Loki* is standing there with a knife in one hand and *Sif*'s hair in the other. Calling Captain Obvious, am I right?

So *Loki*'s caught red-handed. But he's a persuasive guy. He tells Thor, who is ready to pound him to a pulp with his fists, that he'll get *Sif* a wig that'll look even better than her real hair. Thor says okay, because what else is he going do, let his wife go around bald and crying? Not hardly.

Only one place *Loki* can get a fine piece of craftsmanship like that, and that's right here in Nidavellir. So he hops on the tree at Asgard, changes branches in Alfheim, and gets off at Nabbi's Tavern. He asks around and finds a couple of dwarves—Ivaldi's boys—to take the job. They make *Sif* a wig, and just to show off, throw in a magic spear and a ship that folds up so small it fits in a pocket.

You think *Loki* hoofs it back to Thor's palace with the goods? Nah. He's having a good time in Nidavellir. That's when me and my bro *Sindri* come into the story. *Loki* saunters into our shop and starts poking around. He

shows us the wig, the spear, and the ship, and bets his head—no joke, his *head*—we can’t make anything that good. Sindri and me take the bet, because we know our stuff is insanely awesome.

So we’re firing up the kiln, hammering some metal, kind of showing off for the god. He watches for a few minutes, then says he’s going back to Asgard. What he really does? Turns into a horsefly and gets all up in our faces while we’re working. We had, like, no clue it was him bugging us, but it didn’t even matter. What we made *rocked*. First thing we pumped out was this boar with golden bristles that could run wicked fast. Second thing was a gold ring that makes eight copies of itself every ninth day. How fantastic is that? But the best thing we made was this hammer that always hits its target and boomerangs back to its owner.

So we bring the stuff to Asgard, looking for Loki, because he never showed to collect. We’re confident, right, so we also bring a bag to put Loki’s head in. Not that we think he’s really going to pay up. Surprise, surprise, even though all the gods say the boar and the ring and the hammer are the coolest things ever and we totally win the bet, Loki tries to squirm out of the deal.

“I just promised you could take my *head* off,” Loki says. “But I didn’t say anything about my neck. Don’t touch my neck!”

How are we supposed to cut a guy’s head off without touching his neck?

“You’re a cheat and a lying weasel,” Sindri says to him. “So here’s what we’re going to do. We’re going make sure you can’t talk anyone else into making stuff for you.”

Sindri and I jump him. Loki doesn’t see it coming and falls like a ton of bricks. The other gods, they just look the other way while Sindri takes out his needle and thread and—well, you’ve seen Loki’s mouth. Sure, he can talk *now*. Eventually he managed to tug the stitches out of his lips. But he wasn’t saying a single thing when we left that day.

In case you’re wondering, we gave the boar to Frey, the ring to Odin, and the hammer to Thor. You don’t hear much about the first two, but yeah...the hammer we made is *that* hammer.



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## FREY

**TYPE:** God

**HOME WORLD:** First Vanaheim, then Asgard after the Aesir-Vanir War; now rules over Alfheim

**APPEARANCE:** Blue-eyed, blond, and absurdly good-looking in a tan, unshaven, outdoorsy kind of way. Leans toward flannel shirts, well-worn jeans, and hiking boots. Radiates warmth, peace, and contentment.

**FAMILY:** Son of Njord, the sea god; twin brother of Freya; husband of the frost giantess *Gerd*

**BEST KNOWN FOR:** Being the god of spring and summer, and the lord of Alfheim. He's sunshine on a cloudy day. When it's cold outside, he's the month of May.

**FAVORITE WEAPON:** *Sumarbrander*, the Sword of Summer (yay!). Unfortunately, he gave it away (boo!). A deer antler will do in a pinch.

**ANIMAL COMPANION:** When he isn't sailing his ship, which can be folded up to fit in a pocket and always has a favorable breeze, he can be seen riding a shining dwarf-made boar.

## THE RAP DUEL OF JACK THE SWORD AND FREY

JACK

I'm Jack, the Sword of Summer,  
Sumarbrander, Blade of Frey.  
That is, I *was* his, until he tossed me away.

FREY

Jack, I did you wrong. You know I'm feeling  
the guilt.

JACK

Yeah, right. Forget you, man. Talk to my hilt!

FREY

Come on, Slice! Give me a chance. At least  
let me explain  
why I passed you off to *Skirnir*—

JACK

I know why. You were insane.  
You sat on Odin's throne to search for Freya,  
your lost sister.  
A giantess caught your eye. So much for  
Freya. You just dissed her.

FREY

Gerd was gorgeous. Total hottie. I dream of  
her still.  
Shining face, lovely hair—

JACK

I think I'm going to be ill.

FREY

I know you've suffered, Blade of Frey, Sword  
of Summer, Sumarbrander.

JACK

The worst is yet to come, when I'm with my  
new commander.

FREY

You mean Surt, at *Ragnarok*.

JACK

The Black One of Muspellheim.  
On the day of doom, he'll wield me—

FREY

—and free the Wolf. Chaos time.

JACK

Boiling seas. Bloodred skies.

FREY

Gods will vanish. Giants rise.

JACK

I'll be sad to see you go.

FREY

Will you really?

JACK

Really? No.

FREY

Destiny is destiny. We all have our parts to  
play.

JACK

I'll act mine now then, Nature Boy,  
and say, "See you later, Frey."

FREY

There'll never be another  
quite like you, Sword of Summer.  
Our paths may cross again.  
If not...good-bye, old friend.



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## FREYA

**TYPE:** Goddess

**HOME WORLD:** Originally from Vanaheim, sent to Asgard after the Aesir-Vanir War, now back in Vanaheim

**APPEARANCE:** Bathed in and emanates golden warmth. Long blond hair braided in a single thick plait. Lithe figure clad in a white halter top, mid-length skirt, and a gold belt. Carries a knife and key ring on the belt.

**FAMILY:** Daughter of Njord; twin sister of Frey

**BEST KNOWN FOR:** Presiding over Folkvangr, where half the slain heroes spend their afterlife. Sheds tears of *red gold*. Expert practitioner of alf seidr. Has a passion for love, pleasure, and fine dwarven-crafted jewelry. Her signature piece, *Brisingamen*, is a very sparkly ruby-and-diamond lacework necklace of unsurpassed beauty.

# MY CHAT WITH FREYA

## by Snorri Sturluson

**W**hen Helgi scheduled an interview for me with the lovely goddess Freya, I found myself wishing I'd spent more time battling in the fields and less dining on slabs of Saehrimnir. But then I recalled that because I was dead, my physique wouldn't change no matter how much I exercised. I settled for spritzing myself liberally with my favorite lady-pleasing cologne, Thane for Men.

I was about to make my way through Yggdrasil to Vanaheim when Thor stopped me, shoved an envelope in my hand, and ordered me to deliver it to Freya. Naturally, I was only too happy to help.

With my raven scribe at my side, I arrived in the throne room of Sessrumnir, Freya's mansion, at the appointed hour. Instead of the goddess, however, I found a scruffy-looking individual wearing a multihued short-sleeved garment bearing the words KEEP CALM AND FOLKVANGER ON lounging on the dais.

MAN: Whoa, dude, are you supposed to be in here?

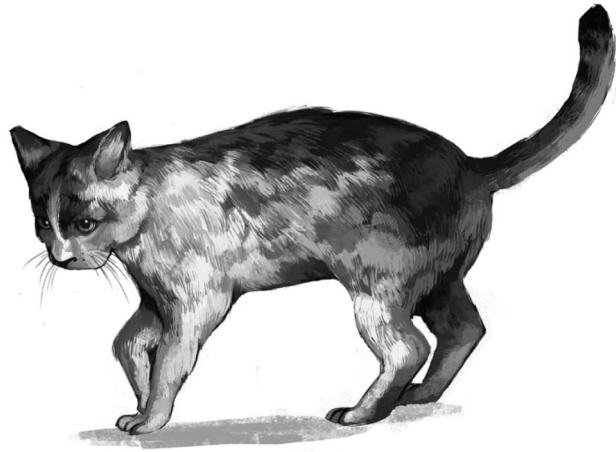
SNORRI STURLUSON: Yes. The goddess Freya herself is to honor me with her presence.

M: Cool. I'm Miles. And judging by your body odor [leans close and sniffs SS], I'm guessing you're a Fart Elf.

SS [indignant]: I am a thane.

M: Sorry, my bad. Well, Athane, I'm not sure when Freya's going to be home. Can I get you a beverage item or some salty snackage while you're waiting?

I was saved from being rude by the arrival of Freya in her cat-drawn chariot. She was every bit as radiant as I remembered her. With her was a young woman—newly deceased, by her bewildered look.



FREYA: Snorri, darling. It's been too long. [Air-kisses SS.] *Mwah. Mwah.*  
Miles, be a love and take—what was your name again, dear?

WOMAN: Ag-Agnes.

F: Hmm. [Taps finger on lips.] Are you *quite* certain Ag-Agnes is the  
name you want for the rest of your death?

AG-AGNES: What do you mean *the rest of my death*?

F: Maybe something a little perkier. Let's see. [Strokes cats.] I think  
Kitty will do nicely. That's what we'll call you, my dear.

KITTY: Who are you people?

F: Miles, explain everything to Kitty, will you?

M: I'm on it. [Fires a finger gun at SS.] Catch ya later, Athane. Here,  
Kitty, Kitty, Kitty!

K: Seriously. What is going on?

F: Oh, darling, don't you see? You're dead.

K: I'm *dead*?

M [grabbing Kitty in a headlock and giving her knuckle noogies]: Come  
on, Kit-Kat, it's not so bad!

K: I'm *dead*?

[Miles and Kitty depart.]

F: Sweet girl. She makes designer eyewear. [Slips on bejeweled cat-eyed  
spectacles.] When she died, I just knew I had to have her for Folkvanger.

SS: Valhalla's loss, I'm sure. How did she perish?

F: A gas explosion. She died while dragging someone from the fire.  
Speaking of gas [sniffs SS], you're rather pungent.

SS: Am I?

F: Yes. Do take a step back, dear. My eyes are starting to water red-gold.

SS: My apologies. Before I forget, I have a message for you from Thor.

F [reads Thor's note\*]: Oh, Odin's Eye, not again. Snorri, sweetie, we'll have to reschedule. Thor needs to borrow something of mine right away. Can you deliver it to him?

SS: Your wish is my command, my lady. What am I to bring?

F: My magic cloak of falcon feathers. He has to fly to Jotunheim to search for...well, I'm not at liberty to say.

SS: Might I use the cloak to return to Asgard?

F: I'd like nothing better than to allow that.

SS: Wonderful!

F: But no. I'm concerned your odor would negatively affect the feathers. You understand, of course. Carry it at arm's length, will you? Off you go now, there's a love.

As of publication time, my interview with the dazzling goddess had not been rescheduled.

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# SKIRNIR

**TYPE:** God

**HOME WORLDS:** Alfheim and Asgard

**APPEARANCE:** Nice-looking, if a bit shifty-eyed

**BEST KNOWN FOR:** Being Frey's servant and messenger. He received the Sword of Summer in exchange for promising that he would convince Gerd, a frost giantess, to marry Frey. He was also sent to the dwarves to instruct them to make the magic rope, *Gleipnir*, that would bind Fenris Wolf.

## I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN BETTER. . . .

by Skirnir

It's not every day I get my hands on a fine piece of magical weaponry. So when Frey offered to give me Sumarbrander in exchange for going to Jotunheim to talk to Gerd for him, you'd better believe I said yes.

But there was a catch: The sword was destined to end up in Surt's hands. You heard right. Surt, the Black One, Lord of Muspellheim, and, oh, I don't know, the one who brings chaos to the world, was supposed to get *my* blade one day.

When I found out, I was a little anxious about Surt coming after me to get the sword. Then I thought, *Well, he won't come after me if I don't have it on me.*

This is where my good-for-nothing son comes into the story. He'd been moaning about how he was bored in Asgard, how all the other gods got their kids the latest cool stuff, how I never let him go exploring in the other worlds, blah, blah, blah. I'd had it up to here with him, so I decided to send him away. "Pick where you want to go," I told him.

First he said Alfheim, then he changed his mind and said Nidavellir. I was about to send him straight to Ginnungagap when he finally decided on Midgard. "But I don't want to walk or ride a horse. I want to go on a boat. Not a little boat—a *big* boat, with sails and rowers. And I want to be captain. That way, everybody has to obey me!"

"But you don't know thing one about sailing, especially navigating a Midgard ocean," I pointed out.

"Why do you have to be such a hater?" he whined. "You never let me do anything!"

I found him a ship pretty quick after that. The crew that came with it looked a little sketchy, but what can you do?

And this is where the sword comes back into the story. Besides worrying about Surt showing up to take it, I'd had the blade long enough to know it was never going to feel right in my hands. I couldn't give it back to Frey, because he'd pledged it to me; and I couldn't give it to just anybody, because what if they gave it to Surt?

So I did the only logical thing. I wrapped it in some old blankets and hid it in the hold of the ship. The second my rotten kid was on board, I bellowed "bon voyage!" and shoved the vessel away from the dock with my foot. I assumed he wouldn't darken my door again for some time, and when he did return, I'd have figured out what to do about Sumarbrander.

I know what you're thinking: incompetent captain, sketchy crew, magic sword, dangerous ocean, unfamiliar world—what could possibly go wrong?

I found out when my kid came sailing back in on a different ship, complaining about being seasick, about how his crew didn't listen to him, and about it not being his fault.

"What wasn't your fault?" I asked, though I was pretty sure I knew the answer.

Surprise, surprise, the boat had sunk off the shore of some Midgard backwater, taking the sword with it. The foolish boy didn't know exactly where the vessel went down—or if he did, he wasn't saying.

So technically, my son is the one who lost the sword. But if you want to pin Sumarbrander's disappearance on me, fine. I'll take the blame for my kid. What else is new?



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## MIMIR

**TYPE:** God

**HOME WORLD:** Originally from Asgard, sent to Vanaheim after the war. Now dwells in the well of knowledge at the roots of Yggdrasil.

**APPEARANCE:** A wrinkly faced, rusty-haired severed head with a beard and an unfortunate underbite—until properly hydrated. Then a smooth-faced, rusty-haired severed head with a beard and an unfortunate underbite.

**BEST KNOWN FOR:** Not having a body. Also, letting individuals drink from the well of knowledge in exchange for servitude, unspeakable anguish, or both. Runs pachinko parlors when not bobbing about in the waters of infinite wisdom.

# TIME ON MY HANDS

by Mimir

**T**here's something I want to get off my chest. I hear what you people say behind my back. You think I'd give my right arm to be the way I was before the Aesir-Vanir war. Not so. Cross my heart, I washed my hands of Asgard and Vanaheim long ago.

Don't get me wrong: Life in the well of knowledge isn't a walk in the park. I've learned things that have sent shivers down my spine. And it can be a real pain in the neck when the gods, dwarves, giants, you name it, come to cry on my shoulder. Sometimes I try to give them a leg up, let 'em have a sip in exchange for a little something-something. Other times, though, they're so irritating I just want to give them a knuckle sandwich. Mostly I just cross my fingers that they don't show their faces here again.

But on the plus side, I've got plenty of elbow room down here in the well. Tons of free time on my hands, too, and I don't just sit around twiddling my thumbs. Nah, instead of dragging my feet, I've invented some stuff. Got my fingers in a lot of pies, actually, and been making money hand over fist, if you want to know the truth. Here are just a few of the creations that took off:

**STRAW:** Whether sucking up a favorite beverage or shooting a spit-soaked wad of paper at an unsuspecting target, this simple tube can do it all. Straws come in fifty-, one-hundred-, and five-hundred-count packages and are available in clear, opaque white, striped, or neon colors. Make 'em bendy or curly for just a little more moola!

**BASEBALL CAP:** It's the headwear sensation that's sweeping the nations! Versatile enough for use in any world. The brim can protect dwarves from the never-ending Alfheim light and the blinding sun of Midgard. Elves, wear it backward for a funky street-cred look and let the sun's rays (and admiring

raves!) bring you back to life. Choose from a wide variety of colors and brim shapes—or use the patented design tool to customize your own unique style. Adjustable back strap makes it a perfect fit for any head.

PILLOW: You've had a long day. Now it's time to relax. Let us help with our feather-filled rectangle of downy softness, the perfect comfort zone in which to nestle your head for the night. When ordering, please specify falcon, raven, pigeon, or eagle fill. Allergic to feathers? Try our all-natural goat-fur alternative instead. Act now and get a second pillow *free*. Shipping and handling charges may apply.



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# HEL

**TYPE:** Goddess

**HOME WORLD:** Helheim

**APPEARANCE:** One-half beautiful woman with elven-pale skin and long dark hair and one-half horrifying rotted corpse

**FAMILY:** The daughter of Loki and a giantess; sister of Fenris Wolf and Jormungand

**BEST KNOWN FOR:** Ruling Helheim, the land of the dishonorable dead

# EVITE FROM HEL



## *You're Invited to Our Family Reunion!*

My, how time flies! It seems like an eternity since we've all gotten together.

If you agree it's been too long, join me here in Helheim to swap stories, share milestones, reminisce about the old days, and talk about the future!

Please bring a dish and a beverage to share. Hope to see you in Helheim!

**When: Nine days hence**

**Where: Helheim**

**RSVP: By next Frigg's Day**

PS: Dress warm—it can get a bit chilly here in the underworld!



Invitee/Relationship to Host	Attending: Yes/No/Maybe	Message to Host
Loki/Father	Maybe	I'm a little tied up right now, but I'll see if I can break free.
Angrboda/Mother	Yes	A thousand years, and not so much as a card or a call from you, Fenny, or Jor. I don't know why I'm surprised. I'm only your mother. Why should my needs be your concern?

		<p>You're ashamed of me because I'm a giantess. That's it, isn't it?</p> <p>I don't think you really want me to come. I mean, why else would you invite Sigyn and Sleipnir? You know how I feel about them.</p> <p>Fine. I'll come. But I won't have fun.</p>
Fenris Wolf/Brother	No	Would have attended if Odin was on the menu
Jormungand/Brother	Mmmphhhmmm	(Note from Host: Jor left a voice mail, but I couldn't understand it, probably because he had his tail in his mouth again. Crossing fingers he shows up with his famous sushi!)
Sigyn/Stepmother	Yes	I should stay at my poor husband Loki's side to keep the venom from hitting his face, but I'll be there. Ooo! I'll bring baby pictures of Narvi and Vali!
Narvi/Stepbrother	No	Deceased (Torn to shreds by Vali after Vali was turned into a wolf)
Vali/Stepbrother	No	Deceased (Disemboweled after tearing Narvi to shreds)
Sleipnir/Step-horse	Yes	Bummed my mom Loki's not coming, but I'll trot on by! Let me know if I can bring my boy Stanley—he wants to meet the other side of the family!



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## HEIMDALL

**TYPE:** God

**HOME WORLD:** Asgard

**APPEARANCE:** Big, beefy, horn-toting, far-seeing, and somewhat sleep-deprived. Has gold teeth.

**FAMILY:** Born of the Nine Mothers (Don't ask me. It's his story to tell.)

**BEST KNOWN FOR:** Standing guarding over the Bifrost, the rainbow bridge that connects Asgard and Midgard

# TESTING, TESTING

Don't be surprised if you hear this over the hotel loudspeaker one day:

**BLAA! BLAA! BLAA!**

Attention! This is a test of the Asgard Emergency Broadcast System. For the next sixty seconds, *Heimdall* will blow his horn. This sound will one day herald the coming of Ragnarok. If this were the actual day of doom, you would be informed that Heimdall had sighted the giants amassing outside Asgard's fortifications and at the far end of the rainbow bridge. Instructions for defending Asgard against their murderous rampage would follow.

This is only a test.

**BLAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA  
AAAAAAA!**

This concludes the test of the Asgard Emergency Broadcast System. We now return you to your regularly scheduled existence.



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# RAN

**TYPE:** Goddess

**HOME WORLD:** The sea

**APPEARANCE:** Ancient-looking, with wrinkly pale white skin, cloudy green eyes, and blond hair streaked with gray. Wears a one-of-a-kind silver net skirt encrusted with random objects and the souls of those lost at sea.

**FAMILY:** Married to *Aegir*, lord of the waves; they have nine daughters

**BEST KNOWN FOR:** Scavenging and hoarding assorted flotsam from the ocean

# FINDERS KEEPERS

by Ran

One day long, long ago, I was having a lovely drift on my husband Aegir's waves when something snagged in my skirt. It looked like a long, skinny wooden bowl—a *boat*, Njord, the god of ships and stuff, called it. When I turned it over, a handful of humans fell out and started drowning.

Out of nowhere, a flock of Odin's *Valkyries* swarmed the sky. Then Njord's daughter—what's-her-name, the pretty one—Freya? Freya flew in on her feline-fueled chariot. Hel made an appearance, too, rumbling up from below. They circled the humans, checking them out and arguing over who should get which of the very nearly newly deceased. It was like a shark's feeding frenzy for souls.

Now, I never intended to host an afterlife. But the way I saw it, the sea was *my* turf, so those souls were *mine*. I caught them in my skirt and held on tight.

The Valkyries pretended they didn't want them anyway—not heroic enough for Valhalla, they claimed—and left. Freya laughed at me and then made off with some sparkly bits the humans had stored in a chest. From then on, I made sure to grab any sparkly bits I found, just to spite her.

Hel gave me the most grief. She complained that Odin and Freya always got the pick of the litter, so she should at least get everyone else. I made my point about there being different rules in international waters, etc. I also threatened to sic her brother the World Serpent on her if she didn't leave immediately. Jormungand and I have an understanding, so I knew he'd come through for me if I asked. In the end, Hel agreed that anyone lost at sea would remain with me forever. So I won that battle.

Best of all? Njord let me keep the boat for my collection. Want to see it?



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## FRIGG

**TYPE:** Goddess

**HOME WORLD:** Asgard

**APPEARANCE:** Beautiful and self-assured with a touch of sadness

**FAMILY:** Wife of Odin, mother of Balder and *Hod*

**BEST KNOWN FOR:** Being the goddess of marriage, motherhood, and relationships. She's also the queen of Asgard.

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## BALDER

**TYPE:** God

**HOME WORLD:** Originally from Asgard, now doomed to Helheim for eternity

**APPEARANCE:** Incredibly handsome

**FAMILY:** Son of Odin and Frigg; brother of Hod

**BEST KNOWN FOR:** Being killed by Hod's mistletoe arrow (But it wasn't his fault!)

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## HOD

**TYPE:** God

**HOME WORLD:** Asgard

**APPEARANCE:** Good-looking and blind

**FAMILY:** Son of Odin and Frigg; brother of Balder

**BEST KNOWN FOR:** Being tricked by Loki into killing Balder with an arrowhead made of mistletoe

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## IDUN

**TYPE:** Goddess

**HOME WORLD:** Asgard

**APPEARANCE:** Youthful, pretty

**BEST KNOWN FOR:** Being the keeper of the apples of immortality. Also for being kidnapped by and rescued from the giant *Thjazi*.

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## HONIR

**TYPE:** God

**HOME WORLD:** Originally from Asgard, sent to Vanaheim after the Aesir-Vanir war

**APPEARANCE:** Has a constantly confused expression on his handsome face

**BEST KNOWN FOR:** Irritating the Vanir gods so much with his indecisiveness that they decapitated Mimir

## DEAR FRIGG A Weekly Advice Column

*Dear Frigg:*

*I am the mother of two wonderful boys. My problem isn't with them, but with a third boy they met at school. It seems every time they're together, this third boy coaxes my younger son into playing a prank on my older boy. While the pranks have been harmless, I'm wondering if I should intervene before things get too out of hand. Or should I just let boys be boys?*

*Signed,  
Three's a Crowd*

*Dear Three's:*

*For the love of Odin, learn from my example and intervene! Like you, I have two sons, Hod and Balder. Growing up, Balder was the best of the best—handsome, kind, cheerful, brave, generous, and tidy—and everybody, including Hod, loved him. He looked out for Hod, because Hod was blind and because he loved him.*

*All would have been fine had my boys not started hanging out with another boy, named Loki. Loki pretended to be their friend—but he secretly despised Balder, so whenever he had the chance, he tried to hurt him. But Balder was safe, for when he was a child, I asked everything in the world not to hurt him. Everything agreed, and so Balder was invulnerable.*

*Or so we all thought.*

*Sadly, I overlooked one tiny plant: mistletoe. Loki used my oversight to his advantage. He fashioned an arrowhead of mistletoe and convinced Hod, who trusted him, to shoot it. Hod didn't realize he was aiming at his brother. The mistletoe missile hit Balder and...well, Balder has been in Helheim ever since. He could have made it back to me if it weren't for Hel's unreasonableness. But that's another story.*

*So yes, you could “just let boys be boys.” But ask yourself: Is it worth the risk?*

*Sincerely,  
Frigg*

*Dear Frigg:*

I like a girl, but she doesn't like me. I'm thinking of asking this other boy who owes me a favor to see if he can make her go out with me. Do you think that's a good idea?

Signed,  
Pining

*Dear Pining:*

*It's terrible to be in love when the object of your affection doesn't reciprocate. But the truth is, you can't "make" a girl go out with you, and you certainly shouldn't try.*

*I remember when a boy named Loki tricked my friend Idun into going on a date with a giant bully named Thjazi. Idun never would have gone out with Thjazi if he'd asked her himself. In fact, when she realized who the date was with, she felt totally trapped. Is that how you want your special girl to feel? I sincerely hope not!*

*Still tempted to pursue your plan? Maybe you won't be when you hear how Idun's story ended. While suffering through the date, she managed to send word of her predicament to her warrior friends. She had lots of friends, and not just because she gives out apples of immortality. Anyway, they came storming to her rescue. Once she was safe, they turned up the heat on Thjazi and made sure he would never treat a girl—or anyone else, for that matter—with such disrespect again.*

*So I urge you, Pining, to think twice before you move forward. Remember, your girl probably has friends, too.*

Sincerely,  
Frigg

**Dear Frigg:**

**My coworker and I are having a disagreement. We do all the work, and our boss takes all the credit. I'm sick and tired of it. I say we should stop working and let him take the blame, but my coworker says that will end badly for us. What do you think we should do?**

**Signed,  
Frustrated**

*Dear Frustrated:*

*Your situation reminds me of two friends, Mimir and Honir, who were chosen for an exchange program to another land. People there loved Honir, because he was good-looking. They believed he was smart, so they came to him for advice, which he gave willingly. What the people didn't know was that Honir was as dumb as rocks. It was Mimir, highly intelligent but lacking in charisma, who was feeding Honir the solutions to their problems.*

*This system worked fine until Mimir got fed up and stopped helping Honir. When Honir's advice suddenly went downhill, the people realized they had been duped. They raged at Honir. The simpleton explained it had all been Mimir's idea. So they went after Mimir and...well, let's just say he ended up in deep water and leave it at that.*

*So before you lose your head over this, I advise you to consider your situation carefully. Will your boss really end up bearing the blame? Or will he point the finger at you?*

*Sincerely,*

*Frigg*

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# TYR

**TYPE:** God

**HOME WORLD:** Asgard

**APPEARANCE:** A one-handed warrior

**BEST KNOWN FOR:** Having his hand eaten by Fenris Wolf while the other gods bind the beast with the rope Gleipnir

## OUCH!

by Tyr

**H**ey, kids! Here's an important safety tip from your old Uncle *Tyr*! Don't insert your hand inside a wolf's mouth—or a lion's, bear's, alligator's, or crocodile's mouth, or in a lawn mower, garbage disposal, snowblower, or blender—because if you do, you're not going to have that hand for much longer! Don't believe me? Ask my good friend Captain Hook how he got his name! And remember: Gloves and mittens come in pairs for a reason!

---

# ULLER

**TYPE:** God

**HOME WORLD:** Asgard

**APPEARANCE:** Disgruntled backwoodsman

**BEST KNOWN FOR:** Claims he invented archery, snowshoes, and other winter sports equipment

FROM THE OFFICES OF JAMES LOVASOCK, ESQ.

Dear Mr. *Uller*:

We have received your recent letter outlining your continued assertion that items you invented are being manufactured and sold in our country—referred to by you as Midgard—with your permission. These inventions include the following:

- Skis (alpine and Nordic)
- Ice skates (hockey and figure)
- Snowboards
- Snowshoes
- Sleighs
- Sleds (runner and flat-bottomed)
- The sport of archery

As we have stated in previous correspondence, unless you can provide evidence that you are indeed the patent rights holder for these inventions, we cannot pursue the matter through legal channels. Please note that your sworn statement that you are “the god of these things” will not be deemed sufficient by the court. Unless you can offer more substantial documentation, we must consider this matter closed once and for all, and respectfully ask that you do not contact these offices again.

Sincerely,  
*James Lovasock,*  
*Attorney-at-Law*



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## NJORD

**TYPE:** God

**HOME WORLD:** Originally from Vanaheim, sent to Asgard after the Aesir-Vanir War

**APPEARANCE:** Like a classic fisherman, complete with yellow slicker, pipe, thick woolen sweater, and weather-beaten face

**FAMILY:** Father of twins Frey and Freya

**BEST KNOWN FOR:** Being the god of ships, sailors, and fishermen

# MYTHICAL BEINGS

by Hunding

**S**urprise, surprise, Helgi's insisting I introduce you to this group, too. One of these days, I swear I'll...Never mind.

I'm using the term *mythical* for the benefit of you once-human einherjar, by the way. There's nothing made-up or imaginary about these beings. They're real. The sooner you believe in their existence, the safer you'll be. Maybe.

First up, the jotun, or giants. They come in all sizes, not just enormous. Species include stone, frost, fire, and shape-shifting. Many live in Jotunheim; others dwell in Muspellheim and Niflheim. Some are strong. Some are clever. Some are masters of illusion. But almost all of them have a mean streak as wide as the Bifrost Bridge. They can sometimes be swayed to work with you, but never count on them being your ally. And I mean never ever.

Next, elves. They are tall, handsome beings who thrive in light and hate darkness. They used to be into alf seidr, or elf magic, and the study of runes. Now most of them are into sitting around and surfing the Internet or

watching their favorite programs on Alflix. Word of warning: Elves are all about beauty. If you aren't one of the beautiful people...well, it's best you avoid Alfheim. In their own way, elves can be almost as cutthroat as giants.

Characterizing dwarves is a little trickier. There's one kind called *svartalf*, which means "dark elf." Why isn't a svartalf an elf? Don't ask me. I didn't create them. It's said the svartalfs are taller and more attractive than your average dwarf because they are descended from Freya, but I can't say for certain. Any dwarf that isn't a svartalf is just a regular old dwarf. All dwarves, by the way, were originally maggots. The gods saw them crawling around in Ymir's flesh, from which the world was created, and the gods decided, *Hey, let's turn those maggots into sentient beings!* Ever since, the dwarves have been tunneling through the dark places of the earth and avoiding the light. I wouldn't bring up the maggot story while you're traveling in Nidavellir, though, unless you want to start a fight.

Valkyries you already know about, since you're in Valhalla, but there's an entry for them anyway. If I didn't include them, they would get mad, and I try to avoid making shield maidens angry.

Finally, there are the Norns. These eerie ladies are tapped into everyone's destinies. You have to experience them to get the full picture. Though come to think of it, the experience is just as tough to fathom as the Norns themselves. Best to do what the rest of us do, which is pray you never have dealings with them. Trust me, it's just easier that way.

That about covers the main categories. But be aware that you could encounter other beings who may strive to deceive, distract, or manipulate. They go by the names *draugr* (zombies), *vala* (seers), *witches* (witches), and *telemarketers* (annoyances).

# THE GIANTS



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## SURT

**TYPE:** Fire

**HOME WORLD:** Muspellheim

**APPEARANCE:** Unbelievably handsome, evil, and well-dressed. All black—hair, clothes, skin—except for mesmerizing red eyes.

**BEST KNOWN FOR:** Undying interest in unleashing the start of Ragnarok by freeing Fenris Wolf with the Sword of Summer.

Editor's Warning: The following entry contains disturbing content. Repeated attempts have been made to delete it, but due to magic beyond our control, it remains permanently typeset onto these pages. We urge you to skip it. If you do choose to read it, please be aware that the Hotel Valhalla and its employees cannot be held accountable for your emotional well-being.

# YOUR DOOM

by Surt

**E**inherjar, hear this from my own lips:

You train in vain. Destiny decrees that come Ragnarok, I will free Fenris Wolf with the blade known as Sumarbrander. The Wolf will devour Odin and then open his jaws to consume these worlds. My army of giants and I will overwhelm Heimdall and storm over the Bifrost. We will destroy everything in our path in the all-consuming fire of chaos.

You will die. Humans will die. Dwarves will die. Elves will die. Gods and goddesses and all creatures, save giants, will die.

So battle each morn knowing that my kind will reign supreme in the end. Resurrect each afternoon knowing that we will re-create the cosmos for giants alone. Feast each evening knowing that we will dine in triumph over your corpses. Slumber each night knowing that your doom is foreordained.

**Ragnarok. It is your end and our beginning.**

**Burn!**

**BURN! HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA!**

**Also...burn.**

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# Ymir

**TYPE:** MASSIVE

**HOME WORLD:** He is literally every part of Midgard

**APPEARANCE:** Before he was killed by Odin and company, he was gigantic. Afterward, not so much.

**BEST KNOWN FOR:** Being sliced and diced by Odin and his brothers, who used his body parts to make Midgard

## GREETINGS FROM GINNUNGAGAP

by Ymir

**H**unding stole my story. I won't go to pieces over that. (Ha! *Ba-boom, shish!* Gods, I love a good punch line. Too bad that wasn't one! Ha!)

Instead, I'll tell you about the cow, Audhumbla. She was in the Gap with me. And she was big. (*How big was she?*) That cow was so big, when she sat around the Gap, she really sat around the Gap!

Seriously, though, Audhumbla the cow kept me alive right up to the moment Odin and his brothers killed me. Why they didn't go for the cow, I'll never know. Udderly ridiculous, am I right? (Ha!)

I would have paid Odin to kill that cow, actually. Why? While I was alive, she started in on this big salt lick. Show of hands: Who here has ever listened to an enormous bovine with a really wet tongue lick something for months? No one? Consider yourselves lucky. Lick, lick, lick, lick, day and

night, night and day. It sounded as if someone was mixing up a tub of tuna and mayo right by my ear. Drove me nuts until I was like, *Kill me now!*



Turns out the licking *did* kill me. After...I don't know, *forever*, the cow's tongue uncovered a god hidden in the salt. This god, Buri, had a son named Borr. Borr married my granddaughter Bestla—that's right, I had kids and grandkids, none of your business how—and Bestla and Borr had Odin, Vili, and Ve, who...well, you know the rest. Chop, chop, slice and dice, so long, Ymir.

The joke's on them, though, isn't it? Because my side of the family, the giants—they're going to have the last laugh when they lick the gods in the battle to end all battles.

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# UTGARD-LOKI

**TYPE:** Shape-shifter

**HOME WORLD:** Jotunheim

**APPEARANCE:** Before eating one of Idun's apples of immortality, he was an old man with gray hair; afterward, he was a young man with black hair. Wears boots, leather britches, an eagle-feather tunic, and one golden armband embellished with bloodstones.

**BEST KNOWN FOR:** Shape-shifting and powerful sorcery. Also, king of the mountain giants and therefore future enemy of the gods and einherjar.

## GUESS WHO?

by Snorri Sturluson

A short time after my conversation with the lady Freya was interrupted, I received an invitation to join her on the outskirts of Jotunheim. Although I was surprised by the choice of location, I hastened there, since it was not for me to question a goddess. I arrived to find her in high spirits.

SNORRI STURLUSON: My lady Freya, I thank you for seeing me again so soon. You are, as always, a picture of loveliness.

FREYA: Why, thank you, Snorri. I could just kiss you for that. In fact, I think I will. [Kisses SS right on the lips.] *Mmmmmmmwah!*

SS [surprised]: M-my lady! Words fail me!

F: That's a first.

SS: Er...

F: Hold that thought. I have another surprise for you! [Air shimmers. The goddess is replaced by a massive giant.] Ta-da!

SS [shrieks]: *Aaaaaaugh!*

UTGARD-LOKI [doubling over with laughter]: The look on your face! Priceless! I'm telling you, Snorts, you einherjar are so gullible. Reminds me of the pranks I played on Thor all those years ago. You know what I'm talking about, right?

SS: I couldn't say.

U-L: I could. The great Thunder God comes waltzing into my territory to challenge my posse to feats of strength and awesomeness. The first night he's here, know what he does? Camps out in a giant's *glove*, thinking it's a *house*! A *glove*! But that's not all. Want to hear what happens next?

SS: Do I have a choice?

U-L: No. The next morning, Thor tries to brain a sleeping giant with his famous hammer. The giant wakes up and asks if a leaf landed on him. Giant goes back to sleep. Thor whacks him again. Giant wakes up and says he felt an acorn bounce on his forehead. Third time, the giant wonders if the hammer hit is a plop of bird poop. [Leans in.] Guess who the giant was.

SS: You.

U-L: Me!

SS: Hilarious. [Stands.] Now if you'll excuse me—

U-L: Sit.

SS: Right. [Sits hurriedly.]

U-L: So now, Thor comes sauntering into my castle bragging about how great he is. I say, "Go on, then, prove it. First, drink everything in this cup. Second, pick up my gray cat. Finally, wrestle that wizened old crone over there to the ground." [Leans in.] Want to know a secret?

SS: You used sorcery so Thor couldn't win.

U-L [guffawing]: I used sorcery so Thor couldn't win! The cup was actually the ocean. The cat was Jormungand, on loan from Aegir's realm. And the crone was old age itself. No one can beat old age, Snorts!

SS: Not even a god? Or what about Idun and her apples of immortality?

U-L [frowning dangerously]: Don't bring up that lady around me, Snorts. She did one of my guys wrong.

SS: Like Loki, my lips are sealed.

U-L: You ain't half bad, thane. Maybe I'll even spare you at Ragnarok.  
But probably not.

[At this time, a pigeon delivers a message to *Utgard-Loki*.]

U-L [reading and grinning]: Oh, I'm loving this! Listen, Snorts, I gotta get going. Just heard a certain someone thinks a certain missing item is buried here in Jotunheim. He's digging holes all over the place looking for it. This I gotta see. [Turns into an eagle and flies off.]

I later learned that the someone was Thor and the item was Mjolnir. Rumor has it the hammer was, indeed, in Jotunheim, but Thor had yet to discover its whereabouts.

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# GERD

**TYPE:** Frost

**HOME WORLD:** Niflheim

**APPEARANCE:** Large and beautiful, with glowing arms

**BEST KNOWN FOR:** Being irresistible to Frey, the god of spring and summer

## GERD JUST WANTS TO BE HEARD

by Gerd

People say I'm a stick in the mud.  
I just like feeling the cold earth under my toes.  
Don't need to dress up  
Or go anywhere but my front yard.

Can I help it if my skin glows?  
It has attracted ships, birds,  
And the unwanted attention  
Of gods from afar.

Frey couldn't even ask me himself.  
Sent his servant to propose.  
Tried to woo me with golden apples,

But I like the red kind better.

When the fancy ring didn't work either,  
Skirnir got angry,  
And pulled out that talking sword.  
My words didn't matter anymore.

I married Frey, and we've made it work.  
He's all about nature and love.  
Still, sometimes, I can't help but wish  
I could crank up the air conditioner.



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## ELVES

**HOME WORLD:** Alfheim

**APPEARANCE:** Tall, good-looking, pale skin; will die without sunlight

**BEST KNOWN FOR:** Being one-time experts at archery and alf seidr, and occasionally decoding the mysteries of runes. Now mostly experts at video viewing.

ALF SEIDR MAKING  
A COMEBACK

## A special report compiled by the staff of *Alfheim Today Online: All the News That's Fit to View*

ALFHEIM—It appears that alf seidr—the magic power that fell out of favor with the rise of technology—is getting a new toehold in Alfheim. And not everyone is happy about it.

“We abandoned that magic for a reason,” stated Smokescreen, owner and chief elf operator of ElfVision Communications. “It’s a health hazard. It demands too much from its practitioners. I’ve heard some even perish attempting to learn the simplest spells! Trust me—if you want a truly magical experience, stick to twenty-four-hour streaming video. All you need for that is a comfortable couch, an enormous monitor connected to ElfVision, and a handy remote—not self-sacrifice.”

The risk to alf seidr practitioners is very real. Performing feats such as healing wounds and issuing defensive power bursts requires a massive output of life-force energy. Expending that energy can leave one drained for hours, even days, according to witnesses.

“I had a case where an elf used alf seidr to help a friend who was having a severe allergic reaction,” one concerned doctor told *Alfheim Today*. “She saved her friend but almost killed herself in the process.”

The biggest threat to life and limb comes from attempting to understand runestones. These symbols embody the essence of the universe. Channeling that essence has been known to overload one’s system and lead to disastrous results, such as death.

Despite the dangers, a grassroots alf seidr movement known as Turn Off and Tune In is steadily gaining momentum, particularly with younger elves. “They feel disconnected from their parents’ sedentary way of life,” stated the head of the movement, Aloe Vera. “They’re curious about the potential of this long-forgotten power. You’ll see many of these same elves studying archery, too. Most instructors are from older generations. Seeing the younger set learning from the older ones—it’s really inspiring.”

Aloe Vera claims that they don’t actively recruit new members. So why have their numbers increased so significantly as of late? “No doubt the looming threat of Ragnarok has something to do with it,” she admitted. “They’re joining because they believe magic and arrows have a better chance of defeating giants than Wi-Fi and decorative throw pillows.”

Only time will tell if she’s right. Until then, the use of alf seidr remains controversial.



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## DWARVES

**HOME WORLD:** Nidavellir

**APPEARANCE:** Craggy and short; will turn to stone if left in the sun too long

**BEST KNOWN FOR:** Expert metalwork and craftsmanship

METAL IN MOTION

by Gonda

**L**ong before I made barstools for Nabbi's Tavern, I had a career crafting labor-saving devices. You know the type of thing—push a button, pull a lever, turn a knob, and ta-da! A machine does your work for you. That career turned out to be unbelievably boring.

Fortunately, destiny steered me in another direction. On an accidental trip to Midgard, I met a human named Rube Goldberg. Goldberg, son of Hannah, came up with these crazy contraptions designed to do simple tasks in the most unnecessarily complicated manner possible. The contraptions, known as Rube Goldberg machines, were poetry in motion.

I took Rube's concept, ran with it straight back to Nidavellir, and set about making my own creations. I repurposed bits and pieces I'd salvaged over the years—a fan, a toy truck, and a pack of dominoes from Midgard, several cat food cans from Vanaheim ("Freya's cats ask for it by name!"), a snow shovel from Niflheim, a coat hanger from my friend Blitzen—you get the idea. I welded and soldered, hammered and fired those pieces into a sequence of interconnected parts. Altogether, they formed a thing of beauty.

My first Rube Goldberg machine was designed to light my kiln. Here's how it worked: A handcrafted silver ball spiraled down a hammered steel track suspended by spun wire from my ceiling. The ball landed in a buffed-to-mirror-shine cat food can. The can tipped the ball into another can, which tipped it into another, and so on through seven cans. The final can tipped the ball into the bed of the toy truck. The truck, refitted for a monorail I'd constructed, shot across the floor and tapped the first in a long twisting line of dominoes that spelled out GONDA. The last falling dominoes climbed up a set of stairs engraved with images of famous dwarves. The final domino struck the coat hanger, now fortified with an enamel finish, sending it whirling around. The coat hanger flicked a switch that turned on the fan. The fan blew against the snow shovel blade. The shovel fell over and landed on the high end of a seesaw that I had forged myself from bronze and decorated with gemstones. The low end flew up and launched another ball—gold this time—clear across the room, where it hit a hammer handed down to me by my ancestors. The hammer fell onto the button that starts my kiln and—voila! The fire lit!

Would it have been easier just to push the button myself? Of course. Would pushing the button have been as satisfying? No way. You might think I'm crazy for spending so much time and effort on such creations. But to me, metal that moves, moves me.



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## VALKYRIES

**HOME WORLDS:** Midgard and Asgard

**APPEARANCE:** Fierce, strong human females, often on horses. Capable of flight. Armed with shields and swords or axes.

**BEST KNOWN FOR:** Identifying individuals who have died in the act of saving others and conveying these heroes to Valhalla

### FIRST FLIGHT OF A VALKYRIE

## Diary Entries [Name withheld to protect author's privacy]

### **Day One:**

I'm a Valkyrie. Man, even after writing it down, it doesn't seem possible! But it's true. I'm an honest-to-goodness Chooser of the Slain, a handmaiden of Odin! One minute, I'm walking down the street. The next, this fierce-looking, helmet-wearing, spear-carrying woman on a flying horse appears in the sky above me. She swoops down and holds out her hand. "I am Gunilla, captain of the Valkyries," she says, all serious and imposing. "You have been chosen by Odin to select and care for fallen heroes in the afterlife, where they will ceaselessly train for Ragnarok, the doomsday battle of the gods against the giants. Do you accept?"

I'd never even heard of Odin or any of those other things, but refusing didn't seem like an option. So here I am in the lobby of Hotel Valhalla with other new recruits, waiting to find out what happens next.

### **Day Two:**

Exhausted. More tomorrow.

### **Day Five:**

Sorry not to have written for a few days. Here's a quick recap of what I've been doing:

- Toured all 540 floors of Hotel Valhalla. Flirted with some good-looking guys on the lower levels.
- Endured a lecture on the Nine Worlds given by some fossilized thane named Snorti. (Might be Snorri? So boring, I almost started *snorri-ing*....)
- Had it drilled into my head that we bring back only the immortal essence (i.e., the souls) and leave the bodies of the fallen behind.
- Got fitted for my Valkyrie uniform: helmet, chain-mail tunic, leggings, boots, sword. (Not to brag, but I look smokin' hot as a Viking warrior.)
- Waited on tables in the Feast Hall of the Slain. Einherjar—the proper name of the dead heroes who live (live?) in Valhalla—eat and drink a *lot*.
- Magically returned to Midgard (the human realm, according to Snorti) every dawn to live the days as a normal teenager.

I'm due back in Midgard in a few hours. Gotta grab some sleep before then, so good night.

PS: Just remembered all the good-looking guys here are dead. Bummer.

## **Day Nine:**

Best. Day. *Ever!*

It started with Gunilla summoning us newbies from Midgard. I was at school, heading to math class, so I veered into the restroom and climbed out the window. There was a *whoosh*, and suddenly I was back at the hotel. Don't ask me how. I have no clue.

We gathered in the Feast Hall. It was hours before dinner, so the place was deserted. Gunilla started talking.

"Take a look at the trainees next to you. And know this: One will perish in the line of duty. Just because you can travel to and from this afterlife doesn't mean you're invincible. You can be killed. Die honorably, and your memory will live on forever. Die dishonorably, and you will be forgotten."

I was thinking, *Okay, might have been nice to know this before I signed up*, when a bunch of veteran Valkyries came in. One approached me, introduced herself as Margaret, and said, "You're going to love what comes next."

Before I could ask what she meant, Gunilla called out, "Flight attendants, prepare for takeoff."

Margaret grabbed my arm and said, "Don't look down." Then she shot straight up into the air! Here's the good part: *I went with her! I. Was. Flying!*

Okay, sure, technically, *I* didn't fly. Margaret did, with me Velcroed to her for dear life. But oh my Odin, it was still amazing. Tomorrow, I get to try it myself. It's going to be *awesome!*

## **Day Ten:**

Hour one: Took off. Crashed into Laeradr (stupid tree). Took off. Fell onto the thanes' table. Took off. Crashed into Laeradr and then fell onto the thanes' table. An unbelievably fat tree-dwelling goat landed on top of me.

Hour three: Reenacted the Wright Brothers' first flight at Kitty Hawk. That is, got airborne for less than a minute before inevitably crashing (into Laeradr yet again).

Hour six: Longer flight. Landed on my feet! (I immediately fell on my face, but still...result!)

Hour nine: Actual swooping and soaring occurred! Sound the horn of triumph, people! I am a Valkyrie!

## **Day Eleven:**

Turns out I have to learn how to fly on a horse made of mist, too. Flying solo with fallen heroes doesn't work so well; apparently they tend to squirm, which causes turbulence. Lessons start tomorrow.

Square one, here I come.

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# THE NORNS

**HOME WORLD:** Asgard; specifically, the lake at the roots of the *Tree of Laeradr* in the Feast Hall of the Slain

**APPEARANCE:** A trio of nine-foot-tall, snow-white, fog-enshrouded, spooky-looking females in flowing white hooded dresses

**BEST KNOWN FOR:** Controlling the destinies of mortals and gods. Also making enigmatic proclamations about those destinies.

## FUN WITH FATE!

We at Hotel Valhalla understand that hearing a proclamation about your destiny can be overwhelming for a new einherji—especially if that proclamation is from the Norns. Why not take a break with Destiny Buzzword? It's easy, fun, and sometimes even accurate. To come up with your three key destiny words, find the first letter of your first name, last letter of your last name, and the month you were born. For example, Snorri Sturluson was born in March, so his buzzwords are Intelligent, Clever, and Coward. Who knows? Maybe someday, your words will be revealed to have deep meaning!

### DESTINY BUZZWORD

A: Terrible

JAN: Magic

B: Hero

FEB: Betrayal

C: Fight	MAR: Coward
D: Everlasting	APR: Daring
E: Wolf	MAY: Honorable
F: Creative	JUN: Victorious
G: Warrior	JUL: Injury
H: Challenge	AUG: Eviscerate
I: Deadly	SEP: Darkness
J: Fearsome	OCT: Unlimited
K: Knowledge	NOV: Giant
L: Fall	DEC: Love
M: Worthy	
N: Clever	
O: Sword	
P: Fearless	
Q: Doomed	
R: Battle	
S: Intelligent	
T: Mistake	
U: Quest	
V: Ruin	
W: Sacrifice	
X: Search	
Y: Healer	
Z: Destroy	



# FANTASTIC CREATURES

by Hunding

**N**ow I'm supposed to profile the creatures that can't speak for themselves, as well as those that can but say either incredibly annoying or unbelievably hurtful things. (There are a few hurtful things I'd like to say to Helgi about now....I'm leaving this in to see if he even reads my work.)

Our menagerie of beasts fall into three categories: notable, regrettable, and edible. Notable ones make worthwhile contributions to the worlds or are significant for other reasons. Those that are regrettable are alarming in every possible way—some more so than others. As for the edible creatures, well, I think that category is self-explanatory.

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# NIDHOGG

**CATEGORY:** Regrettable

**HOME WORLD:** Roots of Yggdrasil

**APPEARANCE:** Snaky, with sharp teeth and an irritated expression

**BEST KNOWN FOR:** Gnawing on Yggdrasil's roots

This fearsome dragon has one purpose in life: to cause destruction by eating away at the base of our existence. It's a mystery to me why we put up with this behavior. I mean, can't someone slip him a chew toy? The only time *Nidhogg* isn't snacking on the roots is when he's coming up with new insults to be delivered to the unnamed resident at the top of the tree.

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# THE ANONYMOUS EAGLE OF YGGDRASIL

**CATEGORY:** Regrettable

**HOME WORLD:** Top of Yggdrasil

**APPEARANCE:** Fierce and feathery

**BEST KNOWN FOR:** Shaking the treetops to cause high winds, earthquakes, and storms

This is the aforementioned unnamed resident, i.e., the receiver of Nidhogg's insults. Which brings up a second mystery: Why doesn't this bird have a name? If it's a question of selecting one, we could just hold a contest, pick a name out of a helmet, or throw a dart at choices tacked to a board. Seriously, what's the big deal?

Incidentally, the eagle fires insults, along with nasty lies, rumors, and other hateful whisperings, right back at Nidhogg. How, you may wonder, are such messages exchanged when the eagle and dragon are at opposite ends of the World Tree? Read on.

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## RATATOSK

**CATEGORY:** Very, very regrettable

**HOME WORLD:** Branches of Yggdrasil

**APPEARANCE:** An enormous, ferocious red-furred squirrel with yellow eyes and razor-sharp teeth and claws

**BEST KNOWN FOR:** Carrying insults between the anonymous eagle and Nidhogg. Also, draining the will to live from those who hear its insult-filled *YARK*.

## JUST BETWEEN YOU AND ME

by Ratatosk

**C**ome here (*you're slow*). Don't worry (*anxiety is your middle name*). I won't bark at you. I want to tell you (*your teammates blame you for that*

*loss) a secret. I know why Nidhogg and the eagle (*they're laughing at you, not with you*) began trading insults. I know (*your best will never be good enough*), because I'm the one who started the feud. I was bored (*your stories make everyone yawn*). To liven things up I sent a whispered taunt (*you've never had an original idea*) down Yggdrasil's trunk to the dragon (*only worms are lowlier than you*) and another up to the eagle (*you'll never fly*). Care to hear (*you crack under pressure*) what those insults were? Then come closer still (*you're afraid of everything and everyone*) and let me whisper (*you're too trusting*) in your ear (*you have earwax*).*

**YAAAARK!**

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# HEIDRUN

**CATEGORY:** Edible (sort of)

**HOME WORLD:** Asgard; specifically, the branches of Laeradr in the Hotel Valhalla

**APPEARANCE:** Overweight, leaky goat

**BEST KNOWN FOR:** Providing milk that is brewed into mead

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# EIKTHRYMIR (ALSO GOES BY THE NICKNAME “IKE”)

**CATEGORY:** Notable

**HOME WORLD:** Asgard, specifically the branches of Laeradr

**APPEARANCE:** Stag with water-gushing antlers

**BEST KNOWN FOR:** Spouting water for the rivers and streams of the world

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# SAEHRIMNIR

**CATEGORY:** Edible

**HOME WORLD:** Asgard, specifically the Feast Hall of the Slain in the Hotel Valhalla

**APPEARANCE:** Enormous animal of indeterminate species

**BEST KNOWN FOR:** Being the main course at dinner every night for every resident

## A TRICKSTER TRAITOR

by Halfborn Gunderson

This story was told to me by one of the older einherjar, who heard it from someone else who used to catch Heidrun's milk in the cauldron, who claims to have heard it from Heidrun herself. Whether it is true or not, I cannot say, but neither can I imagine a reason for the goat to make up such a tale. In the end, you must judge for yourself.

One night Ike and Heidrun were hanging out with Saehrimnir, keeping him company while he resurrected, as they often did, when the subject of Ragnarok came up.

"It occurs to me," Heidrun said, shifting slightly so her milk wouldn't keep dripping onto Saehrimnir's flank, "that no one has ever mentioned what our fate is to be when the giants re-create the cosmos."

"I imagine we'd be useful to the jotun," Saehrimnir mused. "After all, they'll need water and mead and food, won't they?"

"I don't know. Who can tell with giants?" Heidrun said. "What do you think, Ike?"

"We could always ask the Norns if our destinies are to die with the gods or live with the giants," the stag replied. The threesome cast anxious looks at the lake below. "Or not," Ike added.

“Maybe I can help.” Loki swung down from a branch above and landed beside Saehrimnir. In the days before he was tied to a boulder, he often hid in Laeradr, because it was a useful spot from which to spy on the other gods.

“You?” Heidrun gave a skeptical snort. “What could you do?”

“I could talk to the giants on your behalf, tell them what you have to offer. I’m heading to Jotunheim anyway. I owe Angrboda a visit. She’s the giantess mother of my kids Fenris, Jormungand, and Hel,” he supplied upon seeing their blank expressions.

The goat, the stag, and the enormous food supply exchanged glances. “Give us a minute,” Heidrun said.

“Take all the time you want. I’ll be over here.”

Whistling, Loki strolled across the room to the thanes’ table, looking for all the worlds as if he couldn’t care less what they decided. Secretly, however, he very much wanted them to agree, for he planned to use the animals’ inquiry as an opportunity to find out if the giants were willing to spare non-giants on the day of doom. Loki intended to be among those spared, no matter whose side he was fighting on come Ragnarok.

Meanwhile, the three creatures talked it over. None of them trusted Loki, but as they couldn’t leave Laeradr themselves, they decided they had no choice.

“We give you permission to tell the giants what we have to offer,” Ike said.

“Then I’ll be on my way.” Loki vanished.

No sooner had he left than Odin himself appeared. From his all-seeing throne, Hlidskjalf, he’d heard what had transpired, and he was troubled.

“Have you learned nothing after living eons among einherjar?” he demanded. “You would rather betray those who have given you a home than die a noble death defending that home?”

The beasts bowed their heads. Like a well-aimed arrow, Odin’s accusation had hit its mark. They vowed then and there to stand with the gods and think no more of the giants—and so they have done.

As for Loki, his destiny was determined long before his meeting the animals. Nothing he said or did would change what fate had in store.



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## SLEIPNIR

**CATEGORY:** Notable

**HOME WORLD:** Asgard

**APPEARANCE:** Massive eight-legged horse with steel-gray hair, a white mane, and black eyes

**BEST KNOWN FOR:** Having eight legs, being able to fly despite being wingless, and belonging to Odin

# MY DAD'S MOM

by Stanley, Son of Sleipnir  
(translated via a horse whisperer)

**M**ost of you think Loki is 100 percent bad and, like, always messing things up for the gods. That is so not true. One time, she helped Odin and the others out of a huge problem.

That's right; I said *she*. Loki is my grandmother. I'll give you a moment to process that before I go on.

Ready? Okay, here's what happened:

Long ago, a builder came to Asgard. He offered to surround the world with a wall to protect the gods from attack. He said he could build the wall in three seasons, and he wanted Freya, the sun, and the moon in exchange. Freya said no way. The sun and the moon took her side. Loki, though, thought the wall was a great idea. He convinced the other deities to make a counteroffer. If the builder could finish the wall in one season, he could have what he asked for. The task was impossible, Loki pointed out, so Freya, the sun, and the moon would be safe. And so would the gods, because the Aesir would have at least part of a wall.

The gods proposed the plan to the builder. He agreed to the terms and went to work.

What the Aesir didn't realize was that the builder—probably a giant in disguise—had the strongest, fastest, and hardest-working stallion in the worlds to help him. As the season wound down, the fortification neared completion. Freya was a wreck. The sun and the moon weren't too happy, either. Everyone blamed Loki.

Loki owned up to his mistake and set about making things right. Since the stallion was the problem, he figured out a way to get rid of it. He shape-shifted into a gorgeous mare. One flirtatious flick of the mane and coy bat of the eye later, and that stallion was smitten. When Loki took off for the woods, the stallion gave chase—and that was that.

Without his helper, the builder couldn't finish the wall by the deadline. Freya, the sun, and the moon stayed right where they were. And some time later, Loki the mare gave birth to my dad.

So you see? Loki's not *all* bad.



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## JORMUNGAND

**CATEGORY:** Notable

**HOME WORLD:** Seas of Jotunheim

**APPEARANCE:** A poison-shooting snake. Mottled skin of yellow, brown, and green. Enormous green eyes. Ridged forehead. Snub-nosed snout. Rows of sharp teeth. And a really, really long legless body.

**BEST KNOWN FOR:** Encircling Midgard and biting its own tail. Prophesied to consume Thor at Ragnarok.

# MUSIC HATH CHARMS

## by Njord

If Jormungand ever fully awakens, he'll thrash so violently that tsunamis will swamp the shorelines throughout Midgard. So whenever the World Serpent seems restless, a group of my einherjar descendants—the only ones who can safely traverse the seas at such a time—race out to the oceans, dive deep below the surface, and sing him these lullabies. My son, Frey, helped write them, so they are infused with the peace and warmth needed for a sound sleep.

As an interesting side note, humans overheard these songs at some point in history. They adapted the melodies but replaced the original lyrics with their own. Einherjar may recognize the Midgard versions.

### FREY'S ORIGINALS

### MIDGARD VERSIONS

**Slumber, slumber, Jormungand,**

*(Twinkle, twinkle, little star)*

**On seaweed beds so far from land.**

*(How I wonder what you are.)*

**Sleep forever peacefully**

*(Up above the world so high)*

**Deep within the Midgard sea.**

*(Like a diamond in the sky.)*

**Slumber, slumber, Jormungand,**

*(Twinkle, twinkle, little star)*

**Nestled deep within the sand.**

*(How I wonder what you are.)*

**Bite your tail, Jorry,**

*(Rock-a-bye, baby,)*

**Under the waves.**

*(In the treetop.)*

**No need to surface.**

*(When the wind blows)*

**Avoid the sun's rays.**

*(The cradle will rock.)*

**Cuddle an urchin,**

*(When the bough breaks)*

**Snuggle a shark.**

*(The cradle will fall.)*

**Just stay down below**

*(And down will come baby)*

**And sleep in the dark.**

*(Cradle and all.)*

**Please stay sleeping, please stay sleeping,**

*(Are you sleeping, are you sleeping,)*

**Jormungand, Jormungand!**

*(Brother John, Brother John?)*

**Shut your eyes so tightly!**

*(Morning bells are ringing!)*

**Snooze all day and nightly!**

*(Morning bells are ringing!)*

**Don't wake up. Don't wake up.**

*(Ding ding dong. Ding ding dong.)*



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## FENRIS WOLF

**CATEGORY:** Unbelievably regrettable

**HOME WORLD:** Island of *Lyngvi*

**APPEARANCE:** Gray and black fur, powerful build, fangs, and blue eyes. Normal size for a typical wolf, but has an extra-intelligent glint in his eyes.

**BEST KNOWN FOR:** Terrifying savagery. Being restrained by the rope Gleipnir. Signaling the start of Ragnarok upon being freed from that rope.

# THE INTERVIEW I DIDN'T WANT TO DO

by Snorri Sturluson

I want it on record that I never intended to go anywhere near the Island of Lyngvi, and I *certainly* had no interest in talking to the beast that's trapped there. I didn't realize that's where Hotel Valhalla's fold-out boat had dropped me until it was too late. So if the following transcript of our conversation seems a little unprofessional at times, keep in mind that I was wholly unprepared.

SNORRI STURLUSON: Wait a minute. This isn't Norumbega.

FENRIS WOLF: Hello, Snorri.

SS [runs around in circles, screaming]: Where's the boat? Where's the boat?

Fw: Nice of you to drop by.

SS [falls to knees]: Gods help me! Someone get me out of here!

Fw: We never talk anymore. How've you been?

SS [covers head with arms and moans]: Leave me alone. I have nothing to say to you.

Fw: That hurts me, Snorri. It really does. Here I'm thinking, wow, a thane has come to see me. Not even the gods do that. He must be more courageous than they are. [Editor's Note: At this point, the raven records that Snorri stopped moaning and started tuning in to what Fenris Wolf was saying.] But you're just like the rest of them. [Hunches shoulders and hangs head.] Aw, why do I even bother.

SS: I—I'm sorry. It's just, well, I was tricked into coming here.

Fw [gestures at Gleipnir with snout]: Just as I was. We're a lot alike, you and I.

SS: Except I'm a human and you're a wolf.

Fw: Technicalities. We're alike where it counts. In here. [Restraint interferes with attempt to tap chest.] Darn this rope. It ruined a special

moment for us.

SS [shuffles closer to FW]: It looks like a nuisance. Is it really tight?

Fw: Not as bad as it used to be, but it does get in the way. What can I do, though? No one is brave enough to come near me and untie it.

SS [moves closer still]: I'm brave. You said so yourself.

Fw [widens eyes]: You're right! Guess that makes you brave *and* smart. But I bet you hear that all the time back in Valhalla.

SS: Oh, not as much as you'd think.

Fw: Go on. Good-looking thane like you? Those Valkyries probably flit about you like bees around honey.

SS [blushes]: No. Well. Maybe a few.

Fw: I knew it! And I know something that would *really* impress them. You could...nah, you wouldn't do it. Never mind.

SS: What? What were you going to say?

Fw: No, it's too much to ask. Forget it.

SS: Seriously, tell me. I insist.

Fw: Well, if you insist. I was just thinking, you being such a smart, brave, good-looking thane, if anybody could figure out how to untie this old rope, it'd be you.

SS: Oh. Um, gee, I don't know if I should. I mean, the gods bound you in it for a good reason. Didn't they?

Fw: Oh, sure, sure. Assuming being true to myself was a good reason, that is. Was it my fault that I was a boisterous pup who liked to wrestle and play tug-of-war, or that I grew up to be a strong, fierce fighter? You'd think those traits would be appreciated in Asgard, not punished.

SS: Is that why you're here? I could have sworn—

Fw [turns his back]: Listen, just forget I asked, all right? I took you for a guy who stood for decency and fairness. I read you wrong. My mistake.

SS: But—

Fw: I thought we had something in common, seeing as how you were hoodwinked into coming here by the gods just like I was. Again, my mistake.

SS: Well, maybe I could just loosen one knot.

Fw: I don't even want you to do it now.

SS [stands]: That's too bad, mister, because I'm going to!

Fw: Seriously, don't come near me.

SS: You can't stop me!

Fw: I'm warning you, you come one step closer and I won't be held responsible for my actions!

SS: Get ready to do your worst, then, because here I come!

[Editor's Note: At this point, the raven stopped recording the conversation. The following is its report of what happened next.]

RAVEN: The thane had clearly fallen under the wolf's spell. A few more steps and he would have fallen into the wolf's jaws or, worse, succeeded in untying Gleipnir and freeing the beast. I prevented this by giving the thane a severe pecking, which broke the spell.

[The transcript picks up again here.]

SS [runs around screaming]:

**AAAAAAHHHH!** Stop pecking me!

[Pauses and looks around] Wait a minute...

**AAAAAAHHHH!** Get me out of here!

[Runs screaming onto fold-out boat, which has miraculously reappeared.]

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# OTIS AND MARVIN

**NAMES:** Otis (aka Tanngnjóstr, aka “Teeth Grinder”) and Marvin (aka Tanngrisnr, aka “Snarler”)

**CATEGORY:** Edible

**HOME WORLD:** Wherever Thor is

**APPEARANCE:** Unkempt brown fur, curved horns, yellow eyes

**BEST KNOWN FOR:** Being a satisfying meal roasted, grilled, or stewed. Also pulling Thor’s chariot.

## GOAT-PLEASING RECIPES by Marvin

Listen up, punks. I don’t go in for therapy the way Otis does. If there’s a problem, I head-butt it straight on. And right now, I got a problem with you. I don’t like how you treat us. Think I’m joking? Well, chew on this. Every night, it’s the same thing: butcher, cook, chew, swallow, resurrect, repeat. That’s fine. It’s our fate to be slaughtered. Whatever. But what I want to know is, would it kill you to spice us up a little now and then? We’re bored to death with being served the same way dinner after dinner! Look at it from our point of view, for crying out loud! A little effort is all I’m asking. Here are some ideas even dimwits like you can follow:

### BUFFALO GOAT TENDERS

Slice us into strips. Dip us in milk and coat us with panko crumbs. Fry us in oil on both sides. Dry us on a paper towel. Move us to a serving dish and smother us in Buffalo sauce. Serve us with blue cheese dressing and celery.

### GOAT POT PIE

Cube us. Combine us with peas, carrots, celery, and goat broth. Boil, drain, and set aside. Sauté chopped onion and garlic. Mix with us and dump us into a piecrust. Cover us with another crust. Bake us in a dwarf kiln until golden brown. Scoop us into bowls and eat us.

### GOAT CAESAR SALAD OR WRAP

Cook and dice us. Toss us with Caesar salad dressing, hand-torn romaine lettuce, shredded parmesan cheese, and croutons. Serve us as a salad or roll us in a wrap for an on-the-go meal.

For additional recipes, consult Saehrimnir, will you? Sheesh.



HOTEL VALHALLA

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## *A Final Word from the Manager*

Dear Valued Guest:

Your journey through the pages of this helpful guide is coming to a close. Yet your existence in our world is just beginning. Exciting new adventures await you daily.\* How will you die tomorrow? The next day? The ones after that? The possibilities are endless.\*\*

But perhaps your destiny will take you in a different direction. Odin chose you once before, when he snatched you at death to join the ranks of his einherjar. He may choose you again, this time to venture on a noble quest beyond the safety of Hotel Valhalla. If he does, know this: Only the best of the best are singled out for this honor. Those who return in triumph rise higher in the ranks. Some, like Gunilla, Davy Crockett, the Eriks, and even, inexplicably, Snorri Sturluson, are awarded seats at the thanes' table. Those who fail, however, return in disgrace—or don't return at all, for death awaits beyond Valhalla's protection.

So when you put this book aside and turn out the light, ask yourself this question: Do you have the strength, bravery, and wisdom to achieve a higher level of greatness? I emphasize that you should ask *yourself*. Know that if you ring the front desk and ask me this question, I will be forced to remind you that while we provide additional towels free of charge, answers to such questions cost extra.

Thank you, and sleep peacefully so you can arise and do glorious battle in the morn.\*\*\*

—Helgi  
MANAGER OF HOTEL  
VALHALLA SINCE 749 C.E.

## PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Aegir	<i>EE-jeer</i>
Aesir	<i>AY-ser</i>
alf seidr	<i>ALF SAY-der</i>
Alfheim	<i>ALF-haym</i>
Asgard	<i>AZ-gahrd</i>
Balder	<i>BAHL-der</i>
Bifrost	<i>BEE-frohst</i>
Brisingamen	<i>BREE-seeng-gah-men</i>
dagaz	<i>DAH-gahz</i>
draugr	<i>DRAU-ger</i>
Eikthrymir	<i>ACHE-thry-meer</i>
einherjar/einherji	<i>in-HAIR-yar/ in-HAIR-yee</i>
Fenris	<i>FEHN-rihss</i>
Fjalar	<i>fee'AHL-ahr</i>
Folkvanger	<i>FOHK-vahn-ger</i>
Frey	<i>FRAY</i>
Freya	<i>FRAY-uh</i>
Frigg	<i>FRIHG</i>
Gerd	<i>GAIRD</i>
Ginnungagap	<i>GEEN-un-guh-gahp</i>
Gjalar	<i>gee-YALL-ar</i>
Gleipnir	<i>GLYP-neer</i>
Gungnir	<i>GOONG-neer</i>
Gunilla	<i>Goo-NEE-la</i>
Heidrun	<i>HY-druhn</i>
Heimdall	<i>HAME-doll</i>
Hel	<i>HEHL</i>

Helgi	<i>HEL-jee</i>
Helheim	<i>HEHL-haym</i>
Hlidskjalf	<i>H'LIHD-skelf</i>
Hod	<i>rhymes with odd</i>
Honir	<i>HOH-neer</i>
Hunding	<i>HUHN-deeng</i>
Idun	<i>EE-duhn</i>
Jormungand	<i>YOHR-mun-gand</i>
Jotun	<i>YOH-toon</i>
Jotunheim	<i>YOH-tuhn-haym</i>
Laeradr	<i>LAY-rah-dur</i>
Loki	<i>LOH-kee</i>
Lyngvi	<i>LEENG-vee</i>
Magni	<i>MAG-nee</i>
Midgard	<i>MIHD-gahrd</i>
Mimir	<i>MEE-meer</i>
Mjolnir	<i>MEE'OHL-neer</i>
Modi	<i>MOH-dee</i>
Muspell	<i>MOO-spel</i>
Muspellheim	<i>MOOS-pehl-aym</i>
Nabbi	<i>NAB-ee</i>
Narvi	<i>NAHR-vee</i>
Nidavellir	<i>Nee-duh-vehl-EER</i>
Nidhogg	<i>NEED-hawg</i>
Niflheim	<i>NIHF-uhl-haym</i>
Njord	<i>NEE'ORD</i>
Norns	<i>NOHRNZ</i>
Norumbega	<i>nohr-uhm-BAY-guh</i>
Odin	<i>OH-dihn</i>
Ragnarok	<i>RAG-nuh-rawk</i>
Ran	<i>RAN</i>
Ratatosk	<i>RAT-uh-tawsk</i>
Saebrimnir	<i>SY-h'rihm-neer</i>
Sessrumnir	<i>SEHSS-room-neer</i>

Sif	<i>SEEV</i>
Skirnir	<i>SKEER-neer</i>
Sleipnir	<i>SLAYP-neer</i>
Snorri	<i>SNOH-ree</i>
Sumarbrander	<i>SOO-mar-brand-der</i>
Surt	<i>SERT</i>
svartalf	<i>SVAHR-tahlf</i>
Svartalfheim	<i>SVAHR-tahlf-haym</i>
Tanngnjóstr	<i>Tang-YOST-ir</i>
Tanngrisnr	<i>TAHN-gris-nir</i>
Thjalfi	<i>TH-yal-vee</i>
Thor	<i>THOR</i>
Tyr	<i>TEER</i>
Utgard-Loki	<i>OOT-gahrd-LOH-kee</i>
Vala	<i>VAL-uh</i>
Valhalla	<i>Val-HAHL-uh</i>
Valkyrie	<i>VAL-ker-ee</i>
Vanaheim	<i>VAN-uh-haym</i>
Vanir	<i>Vah-NEER</i>
Yggdrasil	<i>IHG-druh-sihl</i>
Ymir	<i>EE-meer</i>

## GLOSSARY

AEGIR—lord of the waves

AESIR—gods of war, close to humans

ALF SEIDR—elf magic

ALFHEIM—the home of the light elves

ANGRBODA—the giantess mother of Fenris Wolf, Jormungand, and Hel, with Loki

ASGARD—the home of the Aesir

BALDER—god of light; the second son of Odin and Frigg, and brother of Hod. Frigg made all earthly things swear to never harm her son, but she forgot about mistletoe. Loki tricked Hod into killing Balder with a dart made of mistletoe.

BIFROST—the rainbow bridge leading from Asgard to Midgard

BRISINGAMEN—Freya's signature piece of jewelry, a ruby-and-diamond lacework necklace of unsurpassed beauty

BROKKR AND SINDRI—the dwarves who made Thor's hammer, Mjolnir

EIKTHRYMIR—a stag in the Tree of Laeradr whose horns spray water nonstop that feeds every river in every world

EINHERJAR (EINHERJI, sing.)—great heroes who have died with bravery on Earth; soldiers in Odin's eternal army; they train in Valhalla for Ragnarok, when the bravest of them will join Odin against Loki and the giants in the battle at the end of the world

FENRIS WOLF—an invulnerable wolf born of Loki's affair with a giantess; his mighty strength strikes fear even in the gods, who keep him tied to a rock on an island. He is destined to break free on the day of Ragnarok.

FJALAR AND GJALAR—two nasty dwarves who killed Kvasir

FOLKVANGER—the Vanir afterlife for slain heroes, ruled by the goddess Freya

FREY—the god of spring and summer; the sun, the rain, and the harvest; abundance and fertility, growth and vitality. Frey is the twin brother of Freya and, like his sister, is associated with great beauty. He is lord of Alfheim.

FREYA—the goddess of love; twin sister of Frey; ruler of Folkvanger

FRIGG—goddess of marriage and motherhood; Odin's wife and the queen of Asgard; mother of Balder and Hod

GERI AND FREKI—two wolves who often accompany Odin

GINNUNGAGAP—the primordial void; a mist that obscures appearances

GLEIPNIR—a rope made by dwarves to keep Fenris Wolf in bondage

GUNGNIR—Odin's staff

HEIDRUN—the goat in the Tree of Laeradr whose milk is brewed for the magical mead of Valhalla

HEIMDALL—god of vigilance and the guardian of the Bifrost, the gateway to Asgard

HEL—goddess of the dishonorable dead; born of Loki's affair with the giantess Angrboda

HELHEIM—the underworld, ruled by Hel and inhabited by those who died in wickedness, old age, or illness

HLIDSJALF—the High Seat of Odin

HOD—Balder's blind brother

HONIR—an Aesir god who, along with Mimir, traded places with Vanir gods Frey and Njord at the end of the war between the Aesir and the Vanir

HUGINN AND MUNINN—two ravens who bring Odin information from all over Midgard

IDUN—a goddess who distributes the apples of immortality that keep the gods young and spry

JORMUNGAND—the World Serpent, born of Loki's affair with a giantess; his body is so long it wraps around the earth

JOTUN—giant

JOTUNHEIM—the home of the giants

KVASIR—a wise god born of the saliva of the Aesir and the Vanir

LOKI—god of mischief, magic, and artifice; the son of two giants; adept with magic and shape-shifting. He is alternatively malicious and heroic to the Asgardian gods and to humankind. Because of his role in the death of Balder, Loki was chained by Odin to three giant boulders with a poisonous serpent coiled over his head. The venom of the snake occasionally irritates Loki's face, and his writhing is the cause of earthquakes.

LYNGVI—the Isle of Heather, where Fenris Wolf is bound; the island's location shifts every year as the branches of Yggdrasil sway in the winds

of the void. It only surfaces during the first full moon of each year.

MAGNI AND MODI—Thor's favorite sons, fated to survive Ragnarok

MIDGARD—the home of humans

MIMIR—an Aesir god who, along with Honir, traded places with Vanir gods Frey and Njord at the end of the war between the Aesir and the Vanir. When the Vanir didn't like his counsel, they cut off his head and sent it to Odin. Odin placed the head in a magical well, where the water brought it back to life, and Mimir soaked up all the knowledge of the World Tree.

MJOLNIR—Thor's hammer

MUSPELLHEIM—the home of the fire giants and demons

NARVI—one of Loki's sons, disemboweled by his brother Vali, who was turned into a wolf after Loki killed Balder

NIDAVELLIR—the home of the dwarves

NIDHOGG—the dragon that lives at the bottom of the World Tree and chews on its roots

NIFLHEIM—the world of ice, fog, and mist

NJORD—god of ships, sailors, and fishermen; father of Frey and Freya

NORNS—three sisters who control the destinies of both gods and humans

ODIN—the “All-Father” and king of the gods; the god of war and death, but also poetry and wisdom. By trading one eye for a drink from the Well of Wisdom, Odin gained unparalleled knowledge. He has the ability to observe all the Nine Worlds from his throne in Asgard; in addition to his great hall, he also resides in Valhalla with the bravest of those slain in battle.

RAGNAROK—the Day of Doom or Judgment, when the bravest of the einherjar will join Odin against Loki and the giants in the battle at the end of the world

RAN—goddess of the sea; wife of Aegir

RATATOSK—an invulnerable squirrel that constantly runs up and down the World Tree carrying insults between the eagle that lives at the top and Nidhogg, the dragon that lives at the roots

RED GOLD—the currency of Asgard and Valhalla

SAEHRIMNIR—the magical beast of Valhalla; every day it is killed and cooked for dinner and every morning it is resurrected; it tastes like whatever the diner wants

SESSRUMNIR—the Hall of Many Seats, Freya's mansion in Folkvanger

SIF—Thor's wife

SKIRNIR—a god; Frey's servant and messenger

SLEIPNIR—Odin's eight-legged steed; only Odin can summon him; one of Loki's children

SNORRI STURLUSON—an Icelandic historian, poet, and author of *The Prose Edda*

SUMARBRANDER—the Sword of Summer

SURT—lord of Muspellheim

SVARTALF—dark elf, a subset of dwarves

TANNGNJÓSTR AND TANNGRISNR—Thor's goats, who pull his chariot and also supply him with daily sustenance; after being killed, cooked, and eaten, they can resurrect themselves eternally

THANE—a lord of Valhalla

THJAZI—a giant who kidnapped Idun

THOR—god of thunder; son of Odin. Thunderstorms are the earthly effects of Thor's mighty chariot rides across the sky, and lightning is caused by hurling his great hammer, Mjolnir.

TREE OF LAERADR—a tree in the center of the Feast Hall of the Slain in Valhalla containing immortal animals that have particular jobs

TYR—god of courage, law, and trial by combat; he lost a hand to Fenris's bite when the Wolf was restrained by the gods

ULLER—the god of snowshoes and archery

UTGARD-LOKI—the most powerful sorcerer of Jotunheim; king of the mountain giants

VALHALLA—paradise for warriors in the service of Odin

VALI—Loki's son, who was turned into a wolf after Loki killed Balder; as a wolf he disemboweled his brother Narvi before he was gutted himself

VALKYRIE—Odin's handmaidens who choose slain heroes to bring to Valhalla

VANAHEIM—the home of the Vanir

VANIR—gods of nature; close to elves

YGGDRASIL—the World Tree

YMIR—the largest of the giants; father to both the giants and the gods. He was killed by Odin and his brothers, who used his flesh to create Midgard. This act was the genesis of the cosmic hatred between the gods and the giants.

# Endnotes

## A Word from the Manager

\* All publications and the proceeds thereof will become the property of Hotel Valhalla.

## The Gods and Goddesses

### Odin

\* Unconfirmed rumors claim the secret ingredient was the blood of *Kvasir*, a wise god who arose fully formed from a vat of divine spittle. The saliva itself came from the gods and goddesses, who took turns loogying into the vat to seal the truce that ended the Aesir-Vanir war. Two nasty dwarves, *Fjalar* and *Gjalar*, killed Kvasir and mixed his blood with honey to make the mead. The term “bloodthirsty” may originate with this event.

### Freya

\* Freya tossed the note aside after reading it. The recording raven caught a glimpse of two words: *hammer* and *missing*.

## A Final Word from the Manager

\* Daily schedule of activities posted in the foyer.

\*\* Hotel management cannot be held responsible for damage to property or body, or death by elevator.

\*\*\* Wake-up calls available upon request. Press 0 and key in your room number and the time you wish to be woken by a blast from Heimdall’s horn.

MAGNUS CHASE  
and the GODS of ASGARD

9 FROM  
THE  
NINE WORLDS

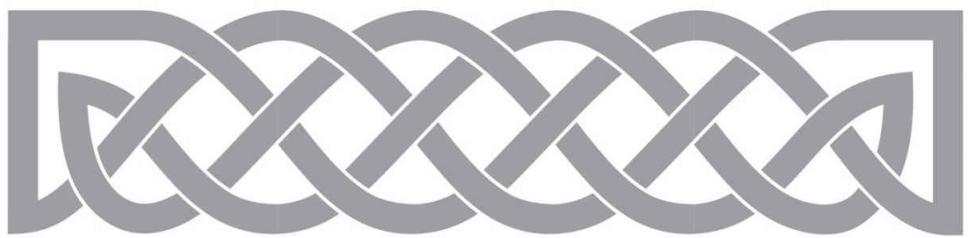
STORIES  
BY  
RICK RIORDAN

Disney • HYPERION  
*Los Angeles New York*

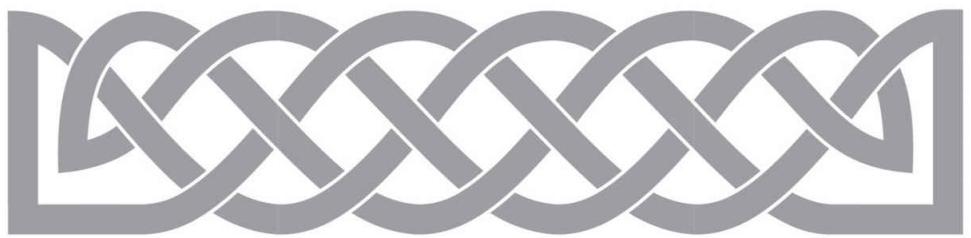
*A special thank-you to Stephanie True  
Peters for her help with this book*

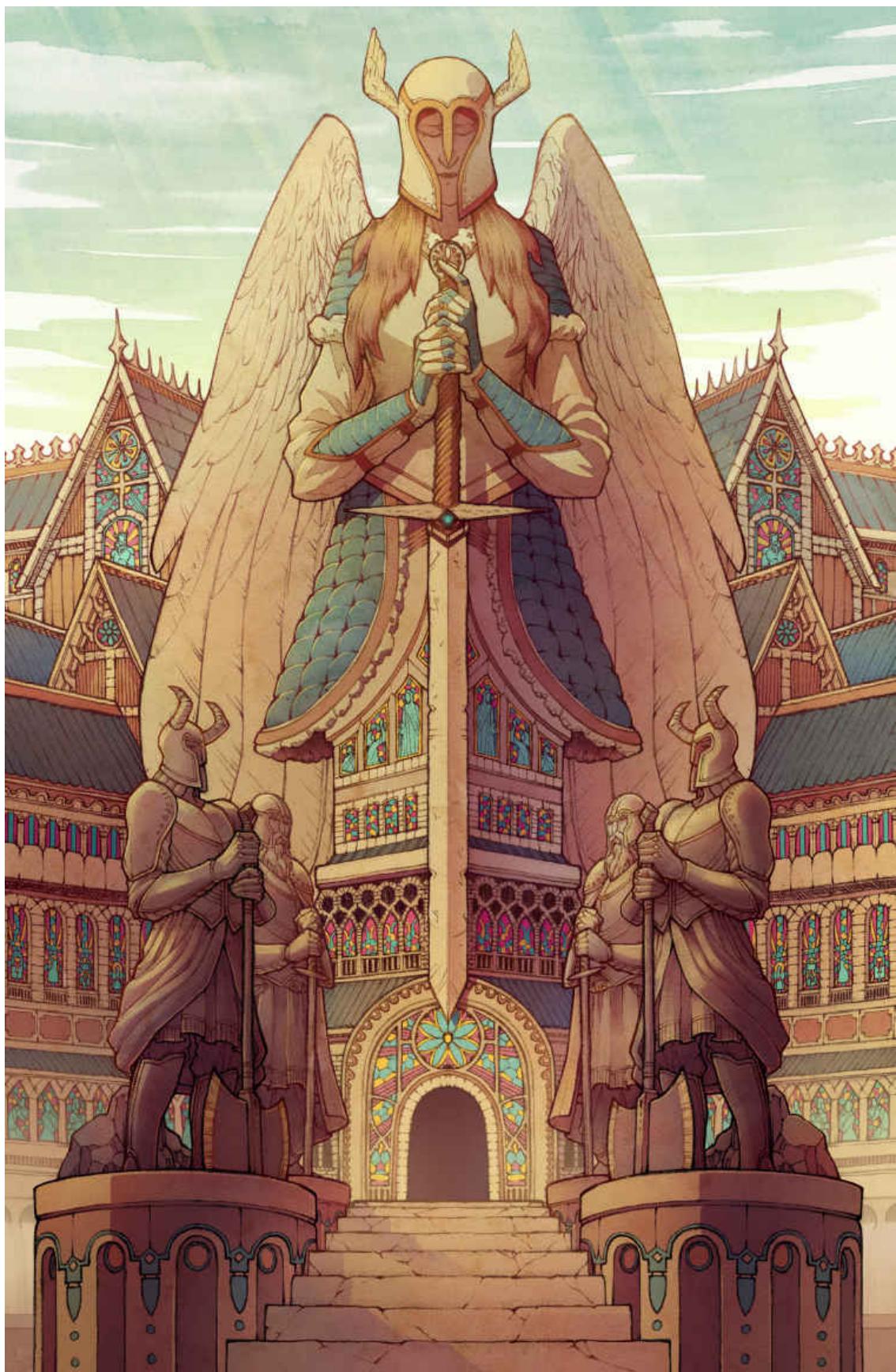
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A S G A R D









# Just Another Decapitated Head

BY ODIN

MY EINHERJAR have a saying: *Some days you are the ax, some days you are the decapitated head.* I like it so much, I'm having T-shirts made for the Hotel Valhalla gift shop.

As the All-Father, god of wisdom, king of the Aesir, and ruler of all Asgard, I am usually the ax. Strong. Powerful. In control.

Usually. But one day not long ago . . . well, let's just say things went awry.

It started when Hunding, bellhop of Valhalla, informed me of a disturbance in the Feast Hall of the Slain.

“Disturbance?” I asked as I opened the hall door.

*Splat!*

“A food fight, Lord Odin.”

I peeled a slab of uncooked Saehrimnir from my cheek. “So I see.”

It wasn’t just any food fight. It was a Valkyrie food fight. Above me, a dozen or more airborne choosers of the slain swooped and dive-bombed while pelting one another with feast beast meat, potatoes, bread, and other edibles.

“Enough!”

My voice sent a shock wave through the hall. All fighting stopped.

“Drop your weapons.”

Saehrimnir steaks and other foods hit the floor.

“Now clean up this mess and think about what you’ve done.”

As the Valkyries moved to find mops, I beckoned to Hunding, who was cowering in a corner. “Walk with me.”

We wove our way through Hotel Valhalla, the eternal home of my einherjar—mortals who had died heroically. My noble Valkyries are responsible for whisking the deceased here, where the brave warriors train to fight on the gods’ side against the giants at Ragnarok, the Day of Doom. (If you wish to know more about this afterlife program, refer to my informational pamphlet *Dying to Fight*.)

I paused at the bottom of a stone staircase. “Since the death of Gunilla, captain of the Valkyries, some of my handmaidens have become . . . feisty.” I touched my face where the raw meat had struck. “I had hoped the Valkyries would choose a new captain themselves. Since they have not, I must intervene.”

Hunding looked relieved. “Do you have Gunilla’s replacement in mind, Lord Odin?”

Sadly, I did not. My first choice, Samirah al-Abbas, had opted to become my Valkyrie in charge of special assignments instead. I had no second choice —yet.

“Tell the thanes to bring candidates to the Thing Room in one hour. I’ll be scanning the Nine Worlds from Hlidskjalf if you need me. And, Hunding?”

“Yes, Lord Odin?”

“Don’t need me.”

I mounted the stairs to my pavilion and sank onto Hlidskjalf, the magic throne from which I can peer into the Nine Worlds. The seat cradled my posterior with its ermine-lined softness. I took a few deep breaths to focus my concentration, then turned to the worlds beyond.

I usually begin with a cursory look-see of my own realm, Asgard, then circle through the remaining eight: Midgard, realm of the humans; the elf kingdom of Alfheim; Vanaheim, the Vanir gods’ domain; Jotunheim, land of the giants; Niflheim, the world of ice, fog, and mist; Helheim, realm of the dishonorable dead; Nidavellir, the gloomy world of the dwarves; and Muspellheim, home of the fire giants.

This time, I didn’t make it past Asgard. Because goats.

Specifically, Thor’s goats, Marvin and Otis. They were on the Bifrost, the radioactive Rainbow Bridge that connects Asgard to Midgard, wearing footy pajamas. But there was no sign of Thor, which was odd. He usually kept Marvin and Otis close. He killed and ate them every day, and they came back to life the next morning.

More disturbing was Heimdall, guardian of the Bifrost. He was hopping around on all fours like a deranged lunatic. “So here’s what I want you guys to do,” he said to Otis and Marvin between hops. “Cavort. Frolic. Frisk about. Okay?”

I parted the clouds. “Heimdall! What the Helheim is going on down there?”

“Oh, hey, Odin!” Heimdall’s helium-squeaky voice set my teeth on edge. He waved his phablet at me. “I’m making a cute baby goat video as my Snapchat story. Cute baby goat videos are *huge* in Midgard. *Huge!*” He spread his hands out wide to demonstrate.

“I’m not a baby!” Marvin snapped.

“I’m cute?” Otis wondered.

“Put that phablet away and return to your duties at once!”

According to prophecy, giants will one day storm across the Bifrost, a signal that Ragnarok is upon us. Heimdall’s job is to sound the alarm on his

horn, Gjallar—a job he would not be able to perform if he were making Snapchat stories.

“Can I finish my cute baby goat video first?” Heimdall pleaded.

“No.”

“Aw.” He turned to Otis and Marvin. “I guess that’s a wrap, guys.”

“Finally,” Marvin said. “I’m going for a graze.” He hopped off the bridge and plummeted to almost certain death and next-day resurrection. Otis sighed something about the grass being greener on the other side, then jumped after him.

“Heimdall,” I said tightly, “need I remind you what could happen if even one jotun snuck into Asgard?”

Heimdall hung his head. “Apologetic face emoji.”

I sighed. “Yes, all right. I—”

A movement in Hotel Valhalla’s garden caught my eye. I looked closer. And immediately wished I hadn’t.

Legs spraddled and wearing nothing but a pair of leather short-shorts, Thor was bending, twisting, and squat-farting. Strapped to his ankle was a device shaped like a *valknut*, a design of three interlocking triangles.

“What in the name of me is my son doing?” I asked in bewilderment.

“Who, Thor?” Heimdall looked over his shoulder. “He’s warming up for a jog through the Nine Worlds.”

“A jog. Through the Nine Worlds,” I repeated.

“Yep. If he logs ten million steps on his FitnessKnut—that thing around his ankle—he earns a cameo appearance on a Midgard television show. That’s why I had his goats. He said they’d slow him down.”

“That’s ridiculous!”

“Not really. Those goats aren’t exactly speedy. Unless they’re plummeting, that is.”

“Not what I meant. . . . Never mind.” I cupped my hands around my mouth. “Thor! Thor!”

Heimdall tapped his ears. “He’s listening to rock.”

“Rock ‘n’ roll?”

“No, just rock. Boulders, gravel, stones.” Heimdall paused. “Or did he say the Stones?”

Thankfully, a messenger raven swooped into the pavilion just then to summon me to the thane meeting.

“At last,” I muttered as I headed to the Thing Room. “A moment of sanity.”

I opened the conference room door to find my trusted advisors twirling in their plush leather chairs.

“Whoever spins the longest without getting sick wins!” one of the Eriks yelled.

“Thanes!” I roared. “Come to order!”

My advisors quickly pulled their chairs to the table (except for Snorri Sturluson, who staggered to the nearest trash bin and threw up). I took my seat at the head and nodded at Hunding. “Bring forth the candidates.”

The first nominee was Freydis, daughter of Erik the Red. Freydis had been a fine Valkyrie back in the day. But judging from her hunched back, vacant smile, and milky eyes, the years had not been kind to her.

“Erik,” I observed, “your daughter is literally ancient.”

Erik pointed at me with double finger spears. “Ancient equals experience, am I right?”

“Not in this case.” I thanked Freydis for her past service and sent her hobbling on her way.

Next was Kara, a well-meaning but clumsy oaf who giggled incessantly. She’d only become a Valkyrie because of her centuries-old relationship with Helgi, manager of Hotel Valhalla. A nice girl? Yes. Worthy of leading my female warriors?

“Ah, no,” I replied to Helgi’s hopeful look.

Boudica, the fearsome queen of the Celts and a Valkyrie since the year 61, was Davy Crockett’s choice. She barged in brandishing her sword, swept the room with an impatient glance, then flung her head back and shrieked with rage.

*“I was told there would be snacks!”* She beheaded the nearest floor lamp and stormed out.

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “At least the next candidate can’t be any worse.”

The next candidate was worse.

A decrepit crone with stringy gray hair and filthy, ragged robes shambled into the room. Her body odor hit me the same time recognition did. I shot out of my seat and summoned Gungnir, my magic spear. “You!”

The hag gave a phlegm-thick cackle. “Ooh, remember me, do you, ol’ One-Eye?”

“I banished you from the Valkyries centuries ago!” I glared at my thanes. “Who dares drag this witch before me?”

“Oh, don’t yell at them,” she chided. “When I heard you were choosing a new Valkyrie captain, I couldn’t resist showing up.” She coughed up something nasty into her palm and wiped it on her robes.

“Begging your pardon, Lord Odin,” Hunding whispered, “but who is she?”

“Hladgunnr,” I growled. “Daughter of Hel, granddaughter of Loki. She plagued Valhalla with her tricks.”

Hladgunnr whooped. “Remember that time I left a trail of nuts to lead Ratatosk to Laeradr?”

“That was *you*?” Snorri cried. “The squirrel’s insults soured Heidrun’s milk mead!” He buried his face in his hands. “Dinner was *ruined*!”

“What can I say?” She winked at me. “Pranks are my thing.” The air around her rippled, and she began to shrink.

Alarm bells rang in my head. “Hladgunnr inherited Loki’s deceitful ways, not his power to shape-shift.”

Screeching with laughter, the imposter transformed into a bald eagle.

“Utgard-Loki.” A current of fear spread through the thanes when I spoke the name of the king of the mountain giants. I thrust the business end of Gungnir at the bird. “How did you gain entrance to this world?”

The eagle leered. “An unexpected opportunity presented itself. I took it.”

I grimaced. “Heimdall and his baby goat video.”

“I’m not a baby!” Marvin yelled from somewhere outside the hotel.

“And Hladgunnr?” I demanded.

“She came to me when you banished her. Horrible BO, but a great source of intel, right up to the end. *Her* end, that is.” Utgard-Loki drew a wing tip across his throat. “Impersonating her was a cinch. Embarrassing you in front of your thanes? That was an added bonus.”

I’d heard enough. I reared back and threw my spear. It never misses, yet Gungnir sailed past the eagle. How . . . ?

Utgard-Loki crowed with laughter. “The mighty Odin, foiled by a bit of distortion magic? This *is* a good day!”

I blinked and saw the eagle was no longer on the table—perhaps it never had been—but by an open window. He saluted me with a wing, then soared off toward the distant mountains of Jotunheim.

I sank into my chair. “Clear the room.”

The thanes beat a hasty retreat. In the silence that followed, one thought rolled through my mind: *Some days you are the ax, some days you are the decapitated head.*

I'd never felt more decapitated in my life. I didn't like it. So, I chose to become the ax.

"Hunding, stop skulking in the hallway and get in here."

The bellhop poked his head around the doorway. "I wasn't skulking," he said defensively. "I was lingering."

"Come in. I need you to do three things. One: Find a way to track Thor's FitnessKnut. Report his whereabouts at all times."

"Won't he just circle the worlds in order?"

I made a face. "Thor's sense of direction is terrible. His path will likely be erratic. Moving on. Two: Have squads of einherjar launch surprise attacks on the Bifrost. I want to know that Heimdall is on guard."

"Very good, sir. And the third thing?"

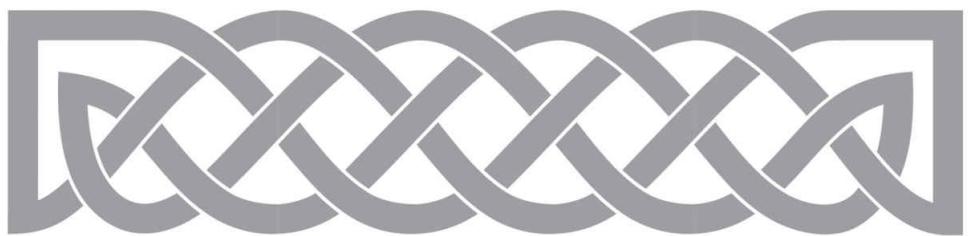
"Inform the thanes that as of tomorrow, I will be unavailable for a while." I transformed my appearance from a rugged one-eyed god of wisdom to a beautiful two-eyed woman clad in chain mail. "I will be living with my Valkyries to decide for myself which of them deserves to be captain."

Hunding raised a hairy eyebrow. "An idea from Utgard-Loki, Lord Odin?"

"Wisdom can be gleaned from any source if one only looks hard enough." I paused, thinking. "Let's put that on a T-shirt. And, Hunding?"

"My lord?"

I transformed back into my true form. "Download cute baby goat videos to my phablet. I must learn what all the fuss is about."



M I D G A R D





# This Is Why I Hate Clothes Shopping

BY AMIR FADLAN

“AMIR, YOU look hideous.” My fiancée, Samirah al-Abbas, stared at my outfit in horrified disbelief.

“Really?” I looked down at myself. “But it’s a tux!”

“A baby-blue tux!”

“With a matching ruffled shirt and floppy bow tie,” I said defensively. “My uncle loaned it to me. I think it’ll impress your grandparents, don’t

you?"

"It's Jid and Bibi's fiftieth wedding anniversary!" Sam sputtered. "You can't wear—"

"Samirah." My father emerged from the kitchen. "He is pulling your leg."

Sam's reddish-brown eyes blazed dangerously, and I suddenly realized that playing a practical joke on a Valkyrie might not be the best idea I ever had.

"I'm heading over to Blitzen's shop right now," I hastily reassured her. "I'll pick out something appropriate, I promise."

"I'll go with you, just to be sure," Sam said.

My father cleared his throat and raised his eyebrows.

"Don't worry, Dad," I said. "Blitz will be there to chaperone us."

"Good to know," my father replied. "But I was actually going to suggest you change before you leave."

"Oh. Right. Give me five minutes."

I ran up to my room and began undressing. Then I froze. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a shadow move across my window. Someone was on the fire escape. The hair on the back of my neck stood up. Heart pounding, I tiptoed over and inched open the curtain.

A pigeon swooped past my face. I leaped back, tripped, and landed on my butt.

"Stupid bird," I muttered. I quickly swapped the tux for faded jeans and a white T-shirt, then hurried back downstairs.

Sam was on her cell phone. *Odin*, she mouthed at me. She listened for a moment, then hung up and gave me an apologetic look. "I have to go. A last-minute einherji extraction. It shouldn't take too long. I'll meet you at Blitzen's. Don't buy anything until I get there!"

I walked her to the door. Sam looked left and right, then leaped into the air and flew off.

"I will never get used to that," I murmured.

Unlike most mortals, I can see through the glamour, the magical force that disguises reality. I can thank—or curse—Magnus Chase for making that possible. He thought it best that I know about my fiancée's Valkyrie life. I wondered what my father would have made of Sam's sudden disappearance. A superfast Uber pickup, maybe?

Having my mind open this way wasn't always fun. For example, on my way to Blitzen's Best, I passed Thor. I saw him for what he really was: a sweaty muscle-bound redhead deity in leather shorts that left little to the imagination. Though the way other pedestrians hurriedly moved aside, it's possible they caught a glimpse of the real Thor, too.

Blitzen's Best, the upscale clothing store owned and operated by Sam's dwarf friend, helped erase the image of Thor from my brain. I'm not much of a clotheshorse—*just say no to the hipster man-bun look* was my motto—but Blitz's colorful designs spoke to me. They didn't seem to call to anyone else, though. I was alone in the store.

"Hey, Blitz, you here?"

A thin man with close-set eyes, patchy light brown hair, and a sparse mustache emerged from the back room. He curled his hands against his chest, like a rodent squatting on its haunches. "The dwarf is not in right now," he informed me in a thin, reedy voice. "I am Stan. May I help you with your purchase?"

To me, shopping for clothes meant grabbing the right size of jeans from a lopsided pile. I wasn't used to having a salesman offer to help, and I'd never known Blitz to have an employee. Then again, I was on Newbury Street, home of Boston's most exclusive boutiques, where customers expected personal service. So I went along, cautiously.

"Sure, I guess." I selected a pair of dark blue trousers from a nearby rack. "I'm going to a fiftieth anniversary party, so I'm looking for something special to wear."

"Special. Yes." He took the trousers from me and returned them to the rack. "These are not special."

I was pretty sure Blitzen would disagree, but I didn't say anything.

Stan wrung his hands as his beady eyes darted over my frame. "Just as I thought. You are trim. Tall, but not too tall. Your legs are slender." He looked up at me. "I have something special that will fit you like a second skin. Wait here."

I'm not going to lie. When Stan disappeared into the back room, I almost bolted. The guy gave off a seriously weird vibe. But the party was that night. If I didn't get something in this store, I'd end up wearing the blue tux. Better to risk Stan's weirdness over Sam's wrath.

Stan returned with a pair of light tan leather pants. He caressed the material, which was unlike any leather I'd ever seen. "Try these." He

extended his arms, giving me no choice but to take the pants. “Put them on, and you will never take them off.”

“Uh, I hope you mean I’ll never *want* to take them off,” I corrected.  
“You will wear them *forever!*”

Stan’s voice had taken on a feverish edge that made me regret not bolting. I decided to appease him by trying on the pants. I’d claim they didn’t fit or were too expensive or something, and get out of there quick.

I held up the pants to examine them in the bright lights of the dressing room. They looked formfitting, like skinny jeans, tapered at the ankle and snug through the hips and thighs. The peculiar leather was lightweight and papery in feel. They were slip-on, with no zipper, just a single ivory button at the waist. Poking out of the single deep front pocket was a scrap of wrinkled yellow paper with a symbol scrawled in red-brown ink.

“You have not put them on yet.”

I nearly jumped out of my skin. Stan was just outside the curtain. I hadn’t heard him approach.

“Uh, one sec.” I shoved the paper back into the pocket, kicked off my sneakers, and slipped out of my jeans. My cell phone fell to the floor. I debated texting Samirah to tell her to hurry up, then remembered she was doing her Valkyrie thing. I put my phone back in my jeans and laid them on the dressing room bench. Then I stepped into the tan pants, pulled them up, and fastened the button.

Vvvtttt! With a sound like a vacuum nozzle sucking against a piece of paper, the pants suddenly constricted around my body.

“Hey! What the heck?”

The curtain flew open. Stan stood there, circling his hands in the air.  
“You have put them on. Willingly. With your own hands.”

“Yeah, and now I’m taking them off. Immediately. With force!” My fingers scrabbled at the button, but it wouldn’t unfasten. I shoved my thumbs into the waistline and tried to wriggle free. The leather stuck to me as if it had been painted on. I yanked at the ankles, clawed at the sides. The pants didn’t budge or tear.

“The pocket. Check the pocket!” Stan stared at the pants, which did nothing to ease my growing alarm.

“There’s nothing in it but an old piece of paper.”

Stan stepped closer. “Check. Again.” He enunciated each word in a voice no longer thin and reedy, but deranged and dangerous. “Now!”

“Okay, okay, chill out! I’m checking.” I slipped my hand inside and blinked. My fingers touched a coin. A half dollar, judging by the size. I withdrew it and gulped. “Is this . . . gold?”

Stan thrust out his cupped hands. “Give it to me.”

Dazed, I dropped it into his palms.

“The pocket,” Stan whispered. “Again.”

I pulled out a second gold coin. Then a third and a fourth. As soon as I removed one, another took its place. Within seconds, gold coins were spilling from Stan’s hands onto the floor. He crouched and started running his fingers through the glittering pile.

I edged toward the front of the store. “Okay, well, this has been fun, and you’re obviously busy, so if you could tell me how to take off the pants, I’ll be on my way.”

“You cannot go,” Stan said, still playing Mr. Moneybags with the coins. “Not as long as you wear the *nábrók*.”

“*Nábrók*? What does that mean?”

Stan glanced at me and smiled slowly. “Necropants.”

I blanched. I’d seen enough crime dramas to know that the prefix *necro* meant *death*. “Just to be clear, *nábrók* means *death pants*?” I swallowed hard. “Are they going to kill me?”

“No. You misunderstand.”

Relief flooded me. “For a moment there, I thought—”

“*Nábrók* are pants made from the skin of a dead person.”

I clapped my hands over my mouth to keep from vomiting.

“These necropants have been in my family for generations,” Stan went on. “They were created by my ancestor, a mighty sorcerer skilled in dark magic. The symbol on the paper is a powerful spell written in the blood of the deceased. The spell . . . it makes gold coins. Forever.”

“Then take the paper!” I cried. “I don’t want it.”

“Fool!” Stan shot to his feet. “The spell must remain in the pocket. It is activated only when a male descendant of the dead man willingly and by his own hand fits the pants onto his body.”

“A male descendant?” Horror flooded my veins. “You mean these are —?”

“Made from the skin of your ancestor, yes.”

“Ahh!” I desperately clawed at the pants. I didn’t want to wear my great-grandfather or anyone else. But they were invulnerable.

Stan's eyes gleamed. "I've been watching you, Amir Fadlan, waiting for my chance to give them to you."

I remembered the shadow crossing my window and once again almost vomited. "Where's Blitzen? What have you—?"

*Ding-a-ling!*

The bell over the store's front door jangled. "Amir? Blitzen? Anybody?" a voice asked. "Jeez, I could rob this place blind and no one would know it."

I sucked in my breath. *Alex.*

Alex Fierro was a gender-fluid einherji from Hotel Valhalla and Samirah's half sibling. He sounded male at the moment—and a little annoyed.

"You know this person." Stan said it to me like a statement, not a question. "If you value their life, you will remain quiet. I too know how to wield dark magic." He gave me a warning look, rearranged his expression to pleasant, and hurried out front. "Good afternoon. May I be of assistance?"

I had a partial view of Alex through the curtain. In his eye-catching pink-and-green outfit and dyed-green hair, he looked more at home in Blitzen's Best than I ever would. But he didn't see me, and I didn't dare draw his attention. Stan obviously had more nasty surprises up his sleeve.

"Who are you?" Alex asked. "Where's Blitz?"

"I am Stan. The dwarf has gone to his apartment to retrieve necessary fashion supplies."

Alex leaned an elbow on the counter. "Stan, huh? Well, Stan, I'm looking for a guy who came here to buy an outfit for a fiftieth wedding anniversary. Tall, fit, and attractive, with a faint scent of falafel. Has he been in?"

"I have seen no such person."

"Well, maybe I could pick out something for him. Heck, I might get a few things for myself, too."

"No. We are closing now. Good day." Stan moved to the door and opened it for Alex.

"Sheesh, hold your horses, pal! I gotta call his fiancée first." Alex pulled out his cell phone and thumbed a number.

A muffled ringtone sounded from my jeans on the dressing room bench—Alex's ringtone. He was calling my phone. But if I answered it, Stan might put a spell on—

“Whoops, wrong number.” Alex hung up and dialed again. “Samirah? Yeah, I’m at Blitz’s. This guy Stan says the dwarf isn’t here and that Amir hasn’t been in. He won’t sell me anything, because they’re closing, like, right now.”

Alex listened for a moment, then laughed. “Oh, *definitely* bring that, so when you see him, you can let him have it.”

*What did Alex mean by “that”?* I wondered.

Alex hung up. “She is *so* not happy.”

“You will leave now.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Alex pushed off the counter and sauntered out. Stan locked the store door and returned to the dressing room. Without warning, he grabbed my arm and twisted it behind my back. Pain exploded in my shoulder.

“It is time to go.”

“Go where?”

“No need to worry about that, my pet,” said Stan, “as that is exactly what you are now—my pet.”

Going anyplace with him seemed like a very, very bad idea. Stalling, on the other hand, seemed like a terrific plan. “Wait! What about the gold? Shouldn’t we—you—bring it?”

Stan laughed. “The nábrók will give an abundant supply. Endless.”

“Can’t I at least put my jeans back on? They’ll fit over the—the necropants.” I almost lost my lunch saying the word. “And hide them from prying eyes.”

“Who would notice?” Stan scoffed.

“Heimdall.” The guardian’s name just popped into my head. With his far-seeing gaze, he could spot trouble in the Nine Worlds—when he wasn’t gazing at his phablet. “He and I have a special connection. He even took a selfie with me.”

Stan paused, considering. “Very well.” He released my arm. “But don’t try anything foolish.”

Naturally, I tried something foolish. Instead of putting on my jeans, I snatched up the nearest weapon—my left sneaker—and whipped it at his head.

With one lightning-quick move, Stan caught my sneaker in one hand and recaptured my arm with the other. “A shoe?” he growled. “Who throws a shoe? Honestly!” He shoved me through the curtain and then stopped short.

Sam stood in the middle of the store. With a spear of brilliant light in hand and wearing a suit of chain mail with a helmet over her green hijab, she looked drop-dead dangerous. If our religion didn't forbid it, I would have kissed her.

"Let him go." Sam's voice radiated Valkyrie power. "Amir belongs to me."

My heart swelled with pride. I felt like we could take on the whole world together, and—

"Not anymore," Stan snarled. "As long as he wears the nábrók, he is bound to *me*."

Oh.

Sam looked confused for a second. I pointed helplessly at my pants. She nodded and said, "Well, then we'll just have to unbind him!"

I heard a zinging sound behind me. Stan stiffened and dropped my arm like a hot potato. I spun to find Alex holding one end of his golden garrote like a leash. The other end was wrapped tightly around Stan, pinning his arms to his sides. Stan spit out a string of curse words.

"Oh, put a sock in it." Sam grabbed a pair of argyles and stuffed them into Stan's mouth.

Alex, meanwhile, eyed my legs. "Nice pants."

"Yeah, not really." I told them the disgusting truth about my attire.

"Gross," Alex said.

"There's more." I showed them the paper with the spell on it.

Sam grimaced. "Dark magic. I hate dark magic. *Light* magic, though . . ." She touched the tip of her spear to the paper and it vanished in a puff of bloodred smoke. "Light magic comes in handy."

Stan let out a muffled howl of fury.

"Hey, Amir." Alex pointed at the necropants. "Let's shuck 'em."

"Alex!" Sam cried, blushing.

Alex rolled his eyes. "I meant get them off—in the back room, obviously," he added when Sam blushed an even deeper shade of red. "Here, you hold Stan's leash."

He gave Sam his end of the garrote, took her spear, and followed me into the dressing room. He raised his eyebrows at the pile of gold coins, then turned to me. "Hold still."

"What are you—*Hey!*"

With three quick and too-close-for-comfort flicks of the spear tip, Alex slashed the pants from my legs. I guess the light magic overpowered the dark once again. The pieces crumbled into drifts of dead skin, which slowly disintegrated into dust.

“Huh. That’s not something you see every day,” Alex said. Then he glanced at my boxers and made a face. “Or those.” He tossed me my jeans and turned his back so I could dress in semiprivate.

“What tipped you off—about Stan, I mean?” I asked.

“Couple of things,” Alex replied. “He referred to Blitzen as *the dwarf* and claimed you hadn’t been in. Knowing how terrified you are of Sam—”

“I am not!”

“—I thought it was unlikely you’d skipped the shopping spree. So, I tested his story and called your phone. When I heard my ringtone, I knew he was lying about you being here. But the biggest clue? He refused to sell me anything. I mean, come on.” He gestured to his pink cashmere sweater vest and tight lime-green pants. “A real clothing salesman would have seen dollar signs the minute I walked into the store.” He nudged the gold coins with his rose-colored boot. “But I guess he had all the money he needed.”

“And more where that came from.” I shuddered. “He was going to use me as his own private ATM. Forever.”

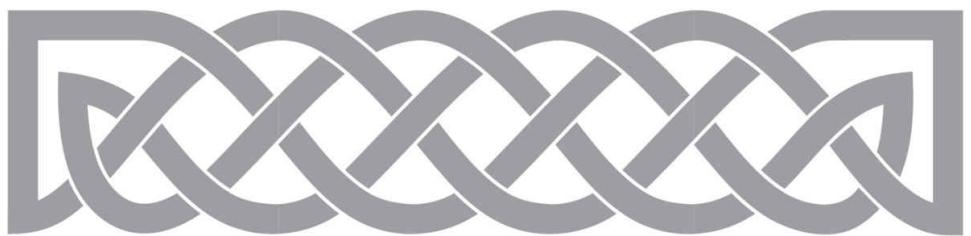
“Dude.” Alex laid a comforting hand on my shoulder. “That would have sucked.”

“If you boys are ready,” Sam called, “I’d like to phone Blitzen, make sure he’s okay. I want to check in with Odin, too. He’ll know what to do with this creep.”

“Hang on.” I scooped up the coins from the floor. “I’m taking these for the Chase Space,” I told Alex, referring to our friend Magnus’s shelter for homeless children. “Anonymous donation for the kiddos. Except for this one.” I put a coin on the counter by the register, then grabbed the dark blue trousers, a pink silk shirt, and a matching paisley vest. Samirah chose my tie.

“I still think I rocked that blue tux,” I told her as we bagged my purchases.

“Oh, Amir.” She smiled sweetly and leaned in close, making my heart thump. “If you ever wear that again,” she whispered, “I’ll skin you alive.”



NIDAVELLIR









# This Little Light of Mine, I'm Going to Let It Shine

BY BLITZEN

GATHERING SUPPLIES from my apartment in Nidavellir was the first item on my day's agenda. Not on that agenda? Fleeing an angry dwarf in a jet-propelled wheelchair. And yet there I was, racing through the dark streets of my home world with Eitri Junior, my old enemy (and I do mean *old*—the guy was one step shy of fossilization), in hot pursuit. Apparently, he was still

miffed because I beat him in a recent crafting contest. Or because I won by sabotaging his handiwork. Either way, he was a sore loser.

“I’m gaining on you!” he wheezed. “I’m—*Aahhh!*”

Junior’s scream was joined by the squeal of burning rubber. He whizzed by me in a blur, clinging to the wheelchair’s armrests as if his life depended on it. Which perhaps it did, as he seemed out of control. Correction: He was most definitely out of control.

*Boom!* Junior crashed headlong into an unlit forge. The chair bounced back and toppled over, wheels spinning and jets sputtering in the dirt. Junior looked dazed, but unhurt. Dwarves came running from every direction.

That was my cue to leave. I still needed some things from my apartment, but I didn’t go there. If Junior came after me again, that’d be the first place he’d look. What he might do if he found me . . . well, let’s just say vengeance-seeking dwarves usually hack first and ask questions never, and I wasn’t wearing my chain mail vest.

Darting from one alley to another, I zigzagged my way through a maze of unfamiliar streets. At one point, I fell face-first in a mud puddle, totally ruining my lavender overcoat. When I finally stopped to catch my breath, I was in a part of Nidavellir I’d never been before. It reminded me of a sketchy section of downtown Boston I’d warned Magnus to avoid.

I put up my collar and started walking. Asking for directions to my neighborhood was out. The few dwarves I passed either avoided making eye contact or rudely mocked my mud-soaked coat. To be fair, they would have mocked it even if it were clean. No appreciation for fashion, dwarves.

I came to a windowless tavern. Muffled pinging and dinging sounds came from within. Not my first choice of sanctuary, but better than roaming the streets aimlessly. I ducked inside.

The interior was dimly lit even by Nidavellir standards, except for the row of pachinko machines. A cross between a vertical pinball game and a coin-operated gumball dispenser, they blinked and flashed with garish colored lights that clashed horribly with the dark wood and red-checkered décor. Seeing those games brought back painful memories of someone I was once connected to—and hoped to stay disconnected from. And then there was the smell—it took all of my willpower not to press my pocket square to my nose as I took a seat at the bar.

The bartender stood at the far end, polishing the inside of a brass mug. I raised a finger to get his attention.

“Hey, pal, I don’t suppose you could tell me how to get to Kenning Square from here?”

He spat into the mug, then continued wiping it with his filthy rag. “Play, drink, or get out.”

“Play? Oh, you mean pachinko. The thing is, I’m not much of a gambler.”

“Play, drink, or get out.”

“I’m not much of a drinker, either.”

“Play, drink, or—”

The door banged open and a sour-faced dwarf came in. My heart plummeted. He was one of Junior’s cronies.

I slid off the stool. “You know what? I think I’ll play.” I hurried to a machine tucked away in a corner and inserted a coin.

The game board went dark. “What the—?”

An extremely short but strong-looking dwarf emerged from the shadows. The machine’s power cord dangled from his hand.

“You owe me a quarter,” I said huffily.

The minuscule muscleman stepped closer and menaced my midriff with a scowl. “Someone wants to see you,” he said.

I cut my eyes toward the front of the bar, where Junior’s henchman was questioning the bartender. “If it’s that guy, I’m not interested.”

The burly dwarf glared up at me, then kicked open a hidden door next to the machine and stepped aside. “In back. Now.”

I would have refused, except I heard the bartender say, “Yeah, he’s here. Now play, drink, or get out.”

“Right. In back. Now.” I darted through the opening. The door closed with a quiet click behind me.

The back room was as dimly lit as the bar. A massive oak desk—beautifully carved, clearly a one-of-a-kind piece—took up much of the space. Behind it was a hand-tooled leather chair with brass rivets, its back to me.

“Um, hello?” I ventured. “You wanted to see me?”

The chair rotated with agonizing slowness. I held my breath, waiting to see who sat in it. It was empty.

“Ha-ha, very funny. You got me—whoever you are.”

Laughter gurgled from the side wall. A light suddenly blazed, illuminating a large fish tank. There were no fish in it, though. Just a

severed, bearded head bobbing in the water next to a plastic treasure chest.

I groaned. “Mimir. I should have known.”

Mimir, an ancient god and my sometime employer, had a body once. Then he tried to pull a fast one on the Vanir. He dispensed wise advice through Honir, the god of indecision, and made them think he was a sage. When the Vanir discovered the deception, they decapitated Mimir. He survived from the neck up thanks to Odin’s magic and the waters of the well of knowledge at the roots of Yggdrasil. He can usually be found there still, dishing out intel to supplicants in exchange for their servitude. I’d been his servant for a few years (long story), but even now that I was free, he still sometimes showed up in other bodies of water, usually to make my life miserable.

The head bobbed to the surface. “Hey, Blitz,” Mimir said. “Long time no see. Pull up a seat. We got things to discuss. That’s why I brought you here.”

“What do you mean, brought me here?”

Mimir chuckle-bubbled. “A little wheelchair sabotage, a little magical manipulation of certain alleyways, bada-bing, bada-boom, and here you are. So, take a seat and have a listen.”

I drew myself up to my full five feet five inches. “Odin freed me from your service, remember?”

Mimir sloshed with annoyance. “Yeah, yeah, yeah. Thing is, the worlds might be in trouble if you don’t act on what I’m about to tell you. Now you interested in what I got to say?”

I huffed as I sat in the leather chair. *Why me?* “I’m listening.”

“Right. You ever heard of a dwarf named Alviss?”

“No.”

“Nasty piece of work. Anyway, he’s plotting to kill Thor on account of Alviss was supposed to marry Thor’s daughter, Thrud. Only Thor changed his mind at the last minute and petrified the guy instead. Someone fixed Alviss up with a little water, so now he is back to normal, and he is *peeved*. When he found out Thor was heading to Nidavellir on his jog through the Nine Worlds—”

“Thor’s jog through . . . ?” I held up a hand. “Never mind. It’s Thor. I should know better than to ask.”

“As I was saying, Alviss is planning to take his revenge.” Mimir floated down to the treasure chest and, using his chin, pressed a button to open it.

Out popped a card, which he grabbed in his teeth, brought back to the surface, and offered to me.

I removed it gingerly from between his chompers. It was a plastic laminated map of Nidavellir.

“See that *X*?” Mimir asked. “My sources say that’s where Alviss will attack. Be there. Stop him. I estimate you’ve got two hours to come up with a plan to save the thunder god.”

“Me, save Thor?” I scoffed. “He can take care of himself!”

Mimir did a spit take. “You don’t get it! You’ve gotta do the job without letting Thor realize he was ever in danger. That means zero contact with the thunder god. You can’t even call out his name. If he finds out about Alviss, he could get mad enough to zap *all* the dwarves—boom!”

Before I could ask further questions, like why his sources couldn’t deal with Alviss themselves, Mimir yanked a plug at the bottom of the tank with his teeth and was sucked down the drain, leaving me with a dripping map and no idea what to do. And I was still out a quarter from the pachinko machine.

At least I got back to my apartment safely, thanks to directions from the minuscule dwarf thug. Once inside, I studied the map. I recognized the *X*’s location, a steep cliff overlooking a river I had once fallen into with my buddy Hearthstone. We’d washed up in Mimir’s well of knowledge, which was how we ended up bound in service to him in the first place.

Knowing the *X*’s location was the plus in the situation. On the minus side, the only way I could think of to stop Alviss—aside from killing or maiming him, which I was not going to do; I had enough enemies in Nidavellir already—would be to replicate what Thor did and petrify Alviss. Then I could revive him with fresh running water once the thunder god was out of danger.

There was just one catch: petrification required sunlight, something Nidavellir lacked.

Okay, two catches: if the sunlight hit me, I’d turn into a statue, too. A well-dressed one, but still . . .

I paced the apartment. Made myself a snack. Paced some more. Checked the time. Panicked. Paced some more.

“Sunlight. Where am I going to get sunlight?”

I searched the room for inspiration. I picked up an expand-o-duck, my handcrafted metal figurine that thwarted enemies by growing to immense

size and crushing them. Would it solve my problem with Alviss, though? I didn't think so.

Still holding the duck, my gaze landed on Hearthstone's tanning bed. My elf friend used its simulated sunlight to keep him healthy when he came to visit. I looked from the duck to the bed and back again. Suddenly, the wheels in my brain started turning.

"What if I built a smaller version of the tanning bed," I asked the duck, "but tweaked the light so that instead of a soft warm glow, it shot out a powerful concentrated beam of sunlight when I opened it? That could work, right?" I made the duck nod, then got busy.

Forty-five minutes later, I had crafted a perfect handheld replica of Hearth's bed. When I opened the clamshell—away from my face—a burst of brilliant sunlight shone out. I quickly snapped it shut again. "Probably not going to be a big seller in Nidavellir," I acknowledged. "But, hopefully, it'll do the trick."

With no time to lose, I selected a stylish ninja outfit from my closet—fitted dark jeans and a black cashmere hoodie with a front pocket for the mini bed—and hurried to the riverside. I hid myself in the shadows.

But either Alviss was a no-show or Mimir's sources were wrong, because no one else, angry dwarf or jogging god, was anywhere in sight.

Or so I thought.

*Scritch-scratch.*

Nidavellir is an underground world with domed cavern ceilings overhead instead of sky. The scratching sound had come from above me. I looked up and saw a dwarf clinging to a stalactite. One end of a rope was wrapped around his waist. The other was attached to a second stalactite far in front of him and directly over the street where Thor was likely to run. Jammed in Alviss's belt was a club bigger than he was.

It didn't take a genius to figure out his plan: swing down like a pendulum and club Thor on the head.

This presented my plan with two unanticipated problems. One, I wasn't sure how far my sunbeam would shoot. The Nidavellir darkness might swallow it before it reached Alviss on the ceiling. I'd have to wait for him to swing down. That meant hitting a moving target. Problem number two, assuming I petrified the dwarf, I had to be sure he swung past or over Thor, not into him.

Then a third problem arose. The ground started shaking with measured thuds, which meant I'd run out of time.

"*Thor.*" Alviss's furious whisper echoed off the cavern walls.

Heart pounding, I pulled out the mini bed. The footfalls drew closer. Thor thundered around a bend in the distance. The sight of him in his tighty-leatherys almost made me root for Alviss.

"Rock, rock. Rock-rock-rock. Rock, rock. Rock-rock-rock," Thor muttered in a loud monotone.

Eyes glued to Alviss, I got into a crouch. Thor drew nearer. I huffed a few quick breaths to psych myself up. Then—

"*Aaaaiiiii!*" With a triumphant yell, Alviss let go of the stalactite. At the same time, I launched myself into Thor's path. I tucked, rolled, and caught a horrifying glimpse of his leather-clad god parts a split second before he tripped over me.

"Rock. Rock. Rock-rock-whoa!"

Thor pitched forward just as Alviss flew overhead, swinging for the fences. The dwarf's club swished through empty air. Thor righted himself and kept going. "Rock. Rock. Rock-rock-rock. . . ."

I'd broken the "zero contact" instruction, but the thunder god seemed oblivious to my presence, so no harm done. As for the killer dwarf—

"*Noooooooo!*"

Flailing his club, Alviss reached the swing's high point and came screaming—literally—back. I opened the mini bed.

*Zot!* Alviss's scream cut off. I watched as the now petrified dwarf sailed past.

I know what it's like to be petrified. It stinks. So I had every intention of cutting Alviss free on his next pass-by and then dipping him in the river to restore him. But before I could, the stalactite attached to the rope broke. Alviss's momentum carried him over the cliff edge. He landed with a splash in the water below.

"Oops." I peered down, then waved my hand dismissively. "Ah, he'll be fine."

"*Blitzen!*" Junior suddenly appeared. He crutched toward me with his rocket-powered walker and a lot of friends. "Get him, boys!"

"Ha! Eat light, Junior!" I unleashed the power of the mini bed.

Sadly, instead of a turn-you-to-stone laser beam, a weak glow enveloped Junior like a soft blanket. The charge had run out. A thin crust formed

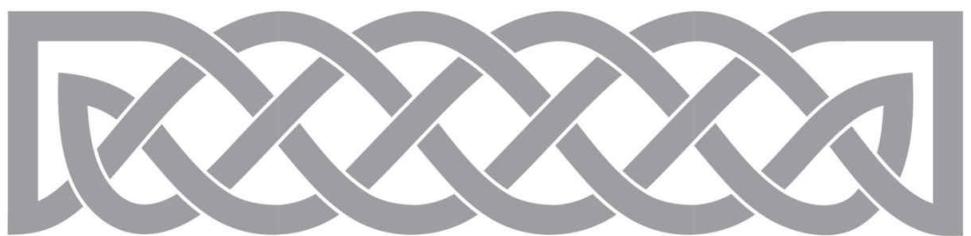
around him. It was nowhere near as dramatic as instant petrification, but it was startling enough to make the other dwarves pause.

And that made me think about how I looked to them. A dwarf who handcrafts a weapon that petrifies other dwarves? Not cool.

“Listen!” I yelled. “My argument is with Junior, not you. When he decrustifies, tell him I want to talk.”

I put the mini bed on the ground and showed them my empty hands while slowly backing away.

It would have been a very powerful moment if I hadn’t backed off the cliff into the river. As I thrashed through the churning water toward shore, three things occurred to me. One, Junior would never, ever forgive me. Two, my cashmere hoodie was ruined. And three . . . Mimir owed me a lot more than a quarter.



ALFHEIM









# Speaking of Trolls . . .

BY HEARTHSTONE

“READY FOR the next one?”

I lip-read T.J.’s question and nodded. He slid a flash card with a handwritten swear word on it across the table, then watched me with gleeful anticipation.

Smiling faintly, I opened my mind and focused on the *dagaz* runestone in my hand. Magic flowed through me like water through a pebbled stream.

The stone warmed, and I signed the swear. I felt sound vibrations in the air, then T.J. fell back onto his bed, shaking with laughter.

I gave him a look and signed three words: *Pull yourself together*.

“Right. Sorry.” T.J. grinned. “It’s just . . . hearing cuss words come out of thin air like that cracks me up every time.”

I’ve never heard the sound of voices. I’ve rarely uttered a sound, either, aside from the occasional sharp intake of breath. Communication had never been a problem, however. My closest friends, Blitzen, Magnus, and Sam, knew ASL—Alf Sign Language—so we conversed easily. When the need arose, they translated for me.

But now I was spending more time in Hotel Valhalla. Many einherjar didn’t know or seem interested in learning ASL (except for T.J., who felt that he needed to learn more curses in order to keep up with Halfborn and Mallory). Blitz, Magnus, and Sam weren’t always around to translate, and I had an intense dislike for writing down my words for others to read. Because reasons.

So, I came up with a different way to communicate: rune magic using dagaz, the symbol meaning new beginnings and transformations, to convert my signs into spoken words.

I touched my tightly closed fingertips together: *More*.

T.J. nodded and slid over another card. I’d just opened my mind when he broke my concentration by tapping my leg. He pointed to a thin gold band around my wrist and asked, “Why’s it doing that?”

The band was a gift from Inge, a lovely hulder—a woodland being, like a sprite, with a cow’s tail and minor magical powers. Inge had once served my family in Alfheim. Been enslaved by, more accurately. I had released her from service the first moment I could. In return, she had made me the bracelet with strands of her hair. She and the band were connected by magic, she had explained. If I were ever in trouble, the bracelet would send her a signal. Likewise, I would know she needed help if the bracelet was twinkling.

The bracelet was twinkling.

Alarmed, I leaped to my feet and shoved the dagaz rune into my pocket. T.J. grabbed my arm. “Hearth! Is everything okay?”

I shook my head and pulled myself free. T.J. deserved more of an explanation, but there wasn’t time. I had to get to Alfheim.

I grabbed my rune bag and raced across the hall to Magnus's room. Inside was an atrium with direct access to Yggdrasil, the World Tree. I swung up into its branches and climbed to the nearest entrance to my home world. The last thing I saw before I slipped through was T.J. staring up at me in confusion.

Then I was floating through the intense sunlight of my world. Far below was the weed-choked rubble heap that was once my childhood home. I willed myself to shift direction away from it. Not because I regretted its destruction—quite the opposite; the place conjured up nothing but unhappy memories—but because I knew Inge would be elsewhere. And wherever she was, she was in trouble. The bracelet conveyed that much with its frantic twinkling. She'd been captured, I feared, and enslaved as she had once been by my family.

I landed on an immaculate patch of grass in a picturesque park. The shade trees, duck ponds, trimmed hedges—everything around me screamed perfection, like most things in Alfheim. I kicked up a divot just to leave a blemish, then set off to find Inge.

There was just one problem: Alfheim was vast. Wealthy estates like my family manor were separated by miles of open green space. Neat, orderly neighborhoods of smaller dwellings marched row after row as far as the eye could see. It would take weeks to locate her by going door-to-door, and even if I found the right house, it was unlikely that the homeowners would admit she was there.

So, I made an educated guess and cut across the park toward the wealthiest neighborhood. I figured I was on the right track when the bracelet's lights began pulsing faster. Just to be sure, I switched direction. The pulsing stopped. The miniature light show resumed when I returned to my original course. I did a subtle fist pump and hurried on.

The bracelet led me to a gleaming white mansion surrounded by lush gardens, well-manicured lawns, and a polished marble wall topped with sparkling shards of glass. Unfortunately, it had a guard shack outside the massive iron gates, so climbing over that wall was out of the question. So was sneaking around to search for another way in, because, as I stood there thinking, the two guards spotted me. They were old acquaintances of mine, police elves Wildflower and Sunspot. And by acquaintances, I mean not friends.

Why were police patrolling this mansion? I wondered. Then I saw their rather plain uniforms and skinny billy clubs. They weren't cops anymore, but private security guards. After the last time I'd seen Sunspot and Wildflower, when my father had unleashed a herd of wild nökks on them, they must have lost their badges. It was worth coming to Alfheim again just to see that.

I took the direct approach and walked up to the gate as if I had every right to be there. The guards' eyes widened with recognition and, I noted with satisfaction, a hint of fear. Sunspot darted into the guard shack. Wildflower, meanwhile, produced a bullhorn and put it to his mouth. I assumed he was yelling at me, but since his lips were covered, I couldn't tell what he was saying. And yes, he knew I was hearing-impaired. The fact that he used a bullhorn to communicate with a deaf person should tell you something about him.

Without breaking stride, I pulled *gebo*, the rune for *gift*, from my bag and lobbed it at Wildflower. He flinched as the stone bounced off his forehead. Then he blinked, straightened, and offered me the bullhorn.

I tucked the horn under my arm, touching my fingertips to my chin and signing *Thank you* as I walked past him to the gate. Sunspot remained in the guard shack, probably quaking in his rent-a-cop shoes. I pressed a *lagaz* rune against the lock. I must have put a little extra magical oomph into it, for the entire wrought-iron gate, not just the lock, liquefied into a puddle of molten metal.

Whoops. My bad.

Halfway to the mansion, I reached for my dagaz rune. I planned to amplify my ASL-to-speech magic with the bullhorn and pretend to be a giant who had come to collect his long-lost Inge.

That plan fell apart when the ground began shaking. T.J.'s curse word flashed through my mind when I looked behind me and saw the cause of the tremors.

Sunspot must have called for backup. It was a huge, hideous troll. (How such an unattractive creature had been allowed, much less employed, in Alfheim, I don't know.) Protective sun-gear covered every inch of him and bore the same security-company logo. Even under his dingy white jumpsuit I could tell he had a massive chest and equally muscular legs, and I could see his yellow teeth and bloodshot eyes through the tinted plastic shield that

hung down from his hood, covering his face. His thick gloved fingers flexed as if they itched to encircle and squeeze my neck.

The troll charged me like an angry rhino. A rather slow angry rhino, but still.

I dropped the bullhorn and scabbled in my rune bag for the *algiz* protection stone. Backpedaling wildly, I hurled it at the troll's massive work boots. A shimmering energy shield sprang up. The troll bounced off it like a bumper car and landed on his fleshy butt. The ground shuddered so violently I almost fell.

He didn't stay down long. With a roar so powerful I felt the sound vibrations, he punched his fist through the shield and came at me again.

I hit him with everything I had. *Isa*, the ice rune, slowed him down by turning the mansion's brick walkway into a skating rink. He stomped his boot, shattering both the ice and the bricks underneath. I tossed the *uruz* symbol above his head and dropped a very surprised ox on top of him. He flicked the animal off like a piece of lint and sent it flying, legs akimbo, into a nearby pond. Using my *hagalaz* stone, I pummeled him with grapefruit-size hail; then I blowtorched him with flames I summoned with my *kenaz* rune. But he still kept coming.

After using so many runes, I was nearing exhaustion. I darted around a corner of the house and hid in a nearby rosebush to catch my breath. Thorny yet secure, it gave me time to search my memory for a troll's weakness.

But I came up empty. As I crouched in the bush, waiting for the troll to kill me, the names my father used to call me echoed in my mind. *Worthless. Disgrace. Stupid.*

I was in danger of falling into a shame spiral when it hit me. *Names*. The best weapon against a troll is to learn its true name. Like a password, speaking the name out loud unlocks the way past the troll's natural defenses —its thick hide, its thicker skull, its bad breath.

*Okay, I thought. Now how do I get him to tell me his name?* Asking wouldn't work. Even if he understood ASL, I doubted he'd be stupid enough to answer my question. Then I remembered where I was—not the rosebush, but Alfheim.

Elves liked to feel superior to others—a skill my father had honed to a sharp, cutting edge. Perhaps a troll who lived here would, too. If I could get him to brag about himself, he might let his name slip.

I touched Inge's band for courage and emerged from the bush. The troll thundered over, arms outstretched and gloved fingers reaching for my neck. I flung up my hands in surrender. My heart hammered two beats before he lowered his meaty paws.

"What trickery is this?" he roared.

I feigned confusion, pointed to my ears, and shook my head.

The troll sneered. "Oh yes. The deaf elf who can do magic. I've heard of you. Mr. Alderman's brat, right?"

Through lip-reading and some guesswork, I got the gist of what he said, but I wrinkled my brow as if utterly baffled.

The troll circled me, still suspicious. His eyes darted to my rune bag. With a surprisingly quick move, he snatched it from my hands. "Ha! Now you're deaf *and* powerless!" Smirking, he dangled the bag just out of my reach.

I cowered appropriately but kept watching his lips.

"Oh yeah!" He tucked the bag into his belt. "What has two thumbs and just defeated the mighty Hearthstone?" He pointed his thumbs at himself. "This troll! And now this troll is going to have some fun."

He rearranged his expression to one of sympathy and bent forward, hands on knees, to look me in the eye. "I'm going to pretend to have second thoughts about killing you. First I'll gain your trust." He plucked a rose and held it out to me encouragingly.

I faked a look of growing hope and took it.

The troll smiled and patted me on the head. "Isn't that nice? What's even nicer is how I'm going kill you." He mimed opening a screw-top bottle and guzzling its contents. "I'll twist your head off your neck, then drink down all your blood. Yum, yum." He smacked his lips and offered me a sip from the pretend bottle.

Smiling hesitantly, I accepted and mimed taking a swig. On the inside, though, I was dying. Pretending to drink your own blood from your decapitated body has that effect.

"And you know what I'll do after that?" the troll continued. "I'll mount your head on a stick and fasten it to my vest so everyone will know that I, Siersgrunnr the Magnificent, bested the famous magic-wielding deaf elf!"

I almost gave myself away then, and not just because the troll had let his name slip. Roughly translated, *Siersgrunnr* means Cheesebutt. You try lip-reading that and not laughing.

Instead, I shoved my hand in my pocket and clasped the dagaz rune. With the other, I pointed to myself and then at the open gate. *I can go?*

“You want to leave? Oh, sure, sure. I don’t mind killing you when your back is turned.” He made a shooing motion to hurry me along.

Heart pounding, I walked a few paces toward the exit. I had no intention of leaving. I just wanted to move closer to the bullhorn.

The dagaz rune was heating up in my palm. It was now or never. I turned back to face the troll. Widening my eyes, I pointed at something over his shoulder. Oldest trick in the book—and he fell for it.

In one fluid sequence, I grabbed the bullhorn, hit the ON button, tossed dagaz into the air, and spelled out the troll’s name in rapid-fire ASL.

“*Siersgrunnr!*”

Cheesebutt whirled around, his face contorting in sudden fear. He knew he was weaker now that his name had been spoken. “Who—who said that?”

I dropped the bullhorn and jerked two thumbs at myself. Then I darted forward and grabbed my rune bag. The *tiwaz* stone—the rune of Tyr, the god of war—practically leaped into my fingers. I used it to transform the rose into a thorn-spiked club. One swing took him out at the knees. A second knocked him unconscious.

Once they realized they couldn’t hide behind Cheesebutt any longer, Wildflower and Sunspot raced up from the guard shack, their billy clubs at the ready. But the double threat of my rune bag and spiked club sent them running right back to the gate again—and into the hills beyond.

My bracelet sparkled.

*Inge.*

I mounted the house’s front steps and banged on the door with the thorn club.

Someone inside must have seen everything. The door opened, Inge was shoved out, and then it slammed shut again. Inge leaped into my arms.

After a moment, I pulled back and signed, *Are you okay?*

She nodded and signed back, *You were brilliant. They were terrified.*

---

She suddenly froze and stared past me in shock. Tremors shook the ground. Had the troll awakened? I spun and thrust Inge behind me.

Then I relaxed. The troll was still lying where I’d left him. The tremors were from a different, but equally disturbing source: Thor.

“Hello, Mr. Elf, Ms. Hulder!” he called as he jogged by.

*Hi, Thor, I signed. Nice shorts.*

Thor stopped and pointed at his earbuds. “Sorry, I’m listening to rock! Maybe you should use the bullhorn.”

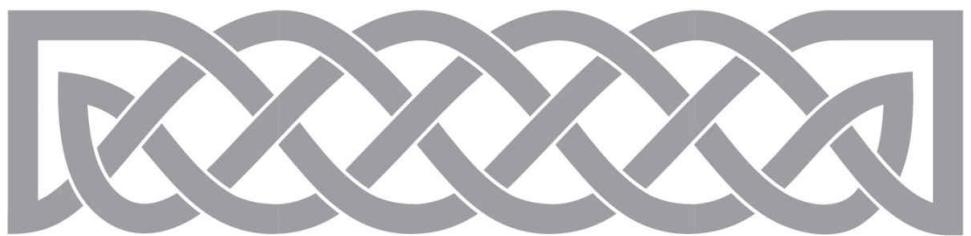
*Or I could just sign louder.*

“Add in bicep curls for a full-body workout?” Thor hefted his hammer, Mjolnir. “A worthwhile suggestion, Mr. Elf! Well, good-bye!”

Thor thundered off.

Usually, I’d leave Alfheim just as quickly. This time, though, I didn’t mind staying a bit longer. Maybe it was the success of the dagaz magic or defeating a troll single-handedly.

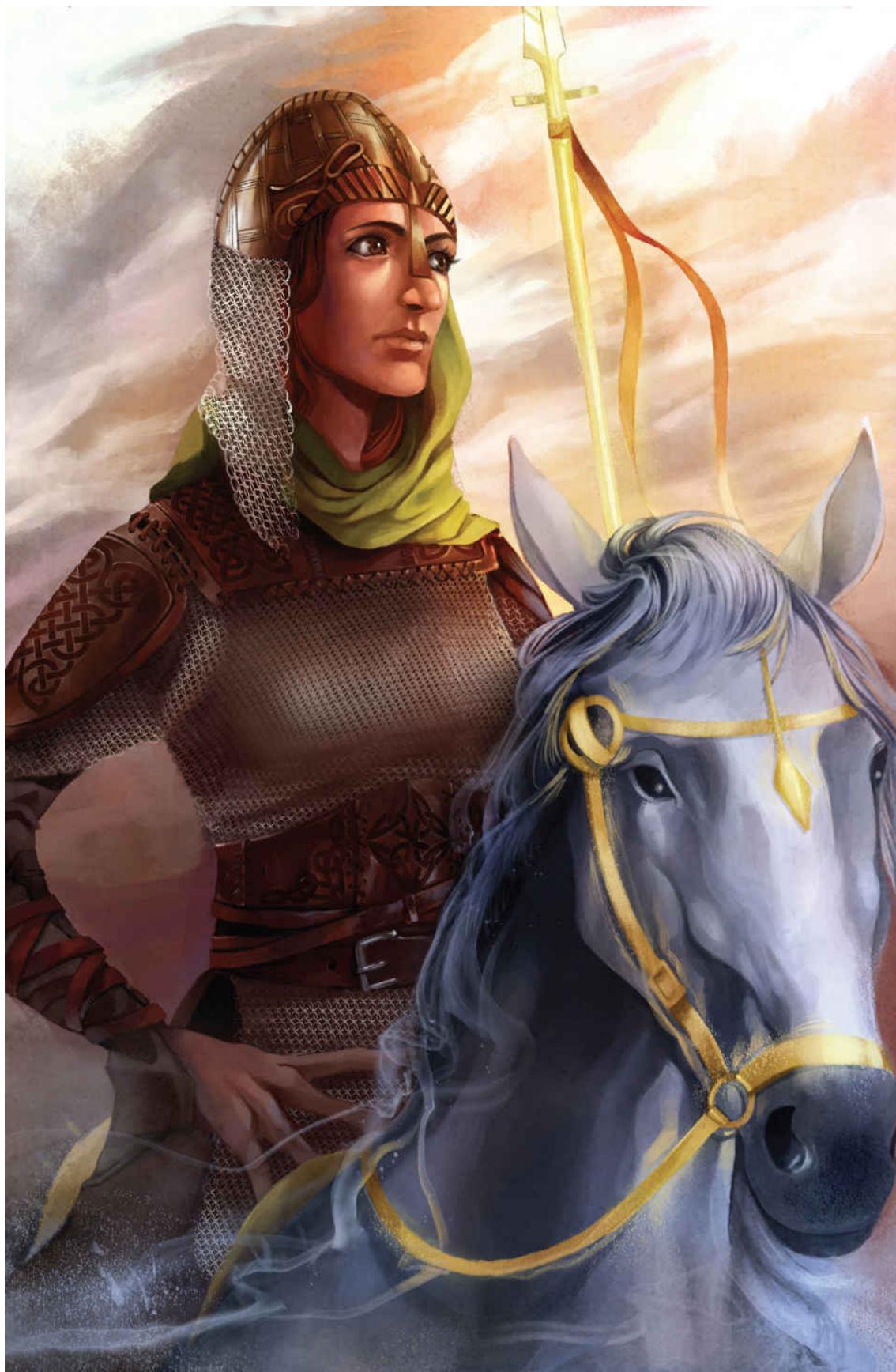
But I suspect Inge’s smiling face had something to do with it.



JOTUNHEIM









# My Eighth-Grade Physics Actually Comes in Handy

BY SAMIRAH AL-ABBAS

“I ASSUME you know why I summoned you here, Samirah.” Odin sat back in his desk chair and regarded me expectantly.

I willed myself not to squirm. “Um, if it’s about how I butt-dialed you during that einherji acquisition just now, I can explain. See, she was thrashing a lot, and my phone was in my back pocket and—”

Odin silenced me with a raised hand. “I admit that overhearing your struggle was . . . unsettling. Such an excessive amount of grunting and cursing. It reminded me of my survival-training seminar with Bear Grylls. Who is not, incidentally, an actual bear. But I digress.” He leaned forward over his desk. “I have a new job for you.”

A thrill shot up my spine. Since becoming Odin’s Valkyrie in charge of special assignments, I’d gone on several dangerous missions. No doubt this next one would prove just as challenging.

“Whatever it is, Lord Odin,” I replied fervently, “I’m your Valkyrie.”

He nodded with satisfaction. “Excellent.” He opened a folder and slid a grainy photograph across the desk to me. “Tell me, what do you make of that?”

I studied the image carefully. “It’s an egg.”

He rolled his hand, encouraging me to continue.

“A red egg. In a nest.”

“Exactly. But not just any egg.” He picked up a remote and pushed a button. A video screen descended from the spear-enhanced ceiling and locked into place. He pushed another button. Images of wolves, giants, gods, and weapons flashed across the screen. Then a title: *The Signs of Ragnarok: Doomed if You Know Them, Doomed if You Don’t*.

I groaned inwardly. I’d sat through Odin’s instructional video when I first became a Valkyrie. I saw it a second time after I helped re-shackle the dreaded killer Fenris Wolf on Lyngvi, the Isle of Heather. Then once more after I’d inadvertently aided my father Loki, a vile trickster, to escape his imprisonment. And after Loki was recaptured? Yep—got to see it again.

To my immense relief, Odin fast-forwarded past the early warning signs: the death of his beloved son Balder, the three years of endless snow and ice known as Fimbulwinter, and the wolves who swallow the sun and the moon. He paused on a shot of three roosters.

“According to all sources, one sign of Ragnarok is the crowing of these roosters.” He circled each bird with a laser pointer as he identified it. “Gullinkambi, who will hatch right here in Asgard. Fialar, whose egg resides in Jotunheim. And Nameless, the future foul fowl of Helheim.”

I raised my hand tentatively. “Excuse me, sir, just to clarify—the rooster’s name is Nameless?”

“It has no name, so I named it Nameless.”

“Oh.”

Odin stood up and paced the room. “In a recent scan of the Nine Worlds, I confirmed that Gullinkambi and Nameless are still in egg form, which is good—*very* good—because they are unlikely to herald Ragnarok while in their shells.” His piercing blue eye flicked over to me. “It’s the third egg that has me concerned.”

I picked up the photo. “The egg of Fialar. In Jotunheim.”

“That photo was taken three months ago by—well, you don’t need to know that. But now the earth giants have blocked my view of the nest with their distortion magic. I suspect they are hiding something from me. That’s where you come in.”

My heart leaped with excitement. Odin was sending me to fight the jotuns in Jotunheim! I jumped up and summoned my spear of light. It blazed with anticipation. “I won’t let you down, sir! I’ll take care of those giants *and* their wretched sorcery!”

“Ah. No.” Odin handed me a Valkyrie Vision body cam. “I need you to take a new photo of the egg. So I can see if it is beginning to hatch.”

My spear dimmed. “Oh.”

He raised an eyebrow. “It’s an important job. Likely fraught with danger.”

“Oh, sure,” I agreed. “Snapping a pic of an egg in a nest would be . . . obviously. I’ll be on my way, then.”

“Take a mount if you wish. But you will need to be discreet. I don’t want the giants to know you were ever there. And this warning, Samirah: Your magic hijab will be of no use in Jotunheim. On their own turf, giants can see through that kind of magic.”

My hijab has the ability to camouflage me and one other person. Being hidden from enemies had come in handy in the past. Not this time, though, it seemed.

I nodded to show my understanding, then departed with the photo and body cam.

Minutes later, I was winging over the earth giants’ land on a horse made of mist. I’d been to parts of Jotunheim before and used familiar landmarks, like the crumbled ruins where a particularly nasty family of giants once lived, to get my bearings. When I didn’t see any eggs or nests in that zone, I expanded my search parameters.

Finally, I saw the nest perched on a hilltop surrounded by a forest. It matched the photo Odin had shown me—a thatch-work of leaves, sticks,

grass, and what I really hoped wasn't human hair—but was much bigger in person, about the size of an aboveground swimming pool. The bowl of the nest was deep. If the egg was inside, I couldn't see it. I nudged the horse downward and dismounted in a distant clearing. The horse took one look at the trees and bolted back into the sky.

I couldn't blame her. The trees were unbelievably creepy—pitch-black and gnarled, with thick ropy vines twisting throughout their branches. As I walked past one loop of vine swinging in the wind, I recalled the forest's name from an old picture book about Jotunheim: Gallows-wood. I shuddered and kept walking to the hill.

*Get a grip, Sam*, I scolded myself. *They're just—Oh, Helheim*, I cursed, dropping into a crouch.

Coming over the far side of the hill was a giant. He was skyscraper tall. Muscles bulged beneath his dark shirt and pants. His receding salt-and-pepper hair was shorn tight to his skull. Interestingly, he had a golden harp dangling from his belt instead of a weapon.

I crossed my fingers and hoped that he was just passing through. But he settled on the nest like a mother hen, carefully tucking the harp in next to him.

“Play!” he commanded. The harp immediately plucked out a tune. The giant cleared his throat and sang along.

*“I am Eggther,  
Protector of the egg.  
If you dare come near me,  
I will break your leg.”*

My mouth turned dry. Had the giant seen me?

*“Gouge out both your eyes  
And punch you in the throat.  
Squeeze you dry into a cup  
To make a blood-beer float.”*

Despite the horrific lyrics, I relaxed. The “you” in Eggther’s song didn’t seem specific to me. I hoped.

Still, I was in a quandary. So long as the minstrel of Gallows-wood sat on the egg, I couldn’t snap my photo. With Eggther’s rousing refrain ringing in my ears—*Bash, maim, squish, splat / Pound and kick until you’re flat*—I backtracked silently into the woods to consider my options. One: I could return to Valhalla and explain to Odin why I’d failed. Two: I could ask

Eggther to pose for a photo with the egg. Three: I could try bashing Eggther before he bashed me.

I was leaning toward Option Two when Eggther stopped singing and started snoring. I risked a peek. He was fast asleep, chin on his chest and a line of drool dribbling from his mouth. Unfortunately, he was still sitting on the egg. That ruled out Option Three, for while I could now easily bash him, I wouldn't have a prayer of moving his body off the nest. I'm strong, but not that strong.

Then my gaze landed on the harp. Seeing it reminded me of an old fairy tale, "Jack and the Beanstalk." The giant in that story had a self-playing golden harp, too. When Jack stole the harp, it alerted the giant by playing loudly. (I always hated the harp for that.) I was willing to bet Eggther's harp would do the same.

I formed a plan. Using the vines, I'd sneak up, rope the harp, and fly off with it. My nebulous horse would have been ideal for this part, but I can fly on my own in short bursts. The harp would sing out—hopefully—the giant would wake up and chase after it—probably—and I'd drop the harp, circle back, snap the egg pic, and hightail it back to Asgard.

Amazingly, everything went according to plan—right up until it didn't. The problem? Golden harps are heavy. Like, really, *really* heavy. When I pulled the rope to lift it, it wouldn't budge. Luckily, it didn't play, either, though I detected a bit of sleepy humming. I took that as a good sign that if —when—I dislodged it, it would sing out an alarm.

I retreated back to Gallows-wood to ponder the problem.

You know how you think you'll never use math and science outside of school? Well, an eighth-grade physics lesson about moving heavy objects with a rope saved the day. Basically, a heavy object can be shifted by attaching one end of a rope to the object, the other to a fixed, immovable object, and then pulling on the rope's center point.

One end of my vine rope was already looped around the harp. I tied the other around a stout tree at the bottom of the hill. Then I wrapped my hijab around my waist like a harness, tied it to the rope's midpoint, and backpedaled until the rope formed a taut V. According to physics, if I pulled hard enough, the harp would move.

"Here goes nothing," I muttered.

I faced the inside of the V so I could keep an eye on the harp and the giant. Then I threw myself back into the harness like the anchor on a tug-of-

war team. My legs pushed against the earth, muscles straining.

The harp rocked slightly, made an ominous thrumming sound, and then settled back into place.

Cursing, I tried again. My foot slipped and I fell. Rubbing my tailbone, I gave myself a quick pep talk.

*Come on, al-Abbas! You can do this! You can—*

I paused in mid-pep. Something was coming around the hill. Something big and hairy and fast. Something in butt-hugging leather shorts. And it was coming right toward me.

“Thor!” I yelled frantically. “Stop! Or at least detour!”

He didn’t hear me. I scrabbled frantically at the knot in my hijab. It came loose a split second before Thor barreled up. In one motion I put the hijab back over my head and dove to one side. His foot caught the rope, but he didn’t break stride.

*Twang!*

The rope went taut, popping the tree out of the ground like a cork from a champagne bottle. The harp burst out of the nest at the same time.

“Well, that worked,” I said.

As I’d hoped, the harp’s strings began plucking out a frantic alarm. The volume increased as it bounced along the ground behind Thor and left Eggther behind. Eggther woke up.

“Hey!” he yelled. “That’s mine!” He jumped up and gave chase.

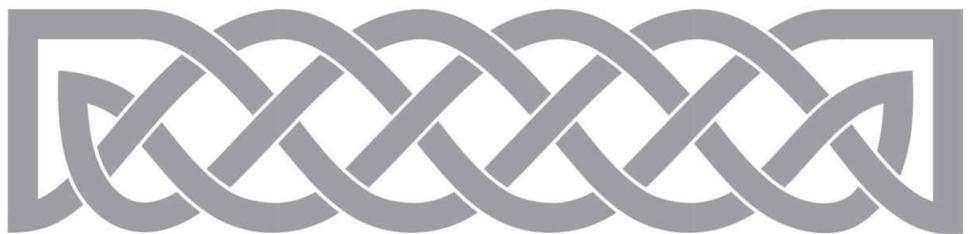
I flew into the air to make sure the giant stayed focused on the thunder god instead of me. From my vantage point, I was treated to a truly bizarre sight: Thor puffing along, the tree and the harp bouncing behind him, Eggther trying to snatch the instrument in the air while bellowing threats. If you’d like to see it for yourself, feel free to take a look at the Valkyrie Vision video I “accidentally” shot.

With Eggther safely out of the way, I checked on the egg. Not a crack anywhere on its bright red shell. I was no bird expert, but I figured that meant Fialar wasn’t hatching anytime soon. I was tempted to fly back to Asgard with it so we could keep a close watch on the future rooster of doom.

But I knew it wouldn’t make a difference. Fialar would hatch in Jotunheim as foretold, and it would crow someday, and Ragnarok would come.

So, I did what I was sent to do.

“Say cheese!”



HELHEIM









# Nice Doggy

BY THOMAS “T.J.” JEFFERSON JR.

“I’VE SAID it before, and I’ll say it again.” I flumped back onto the battered sofa of floor nineteen’s lounge and patted my stomach. “Santarpio’s pizza is worth sneaking out for.”

I reached for another slice.

“Uh-uh. You’ve had plenty.” Mallory dropped the pizza box lid over the remains and stood up. “I’m taking this to Halfborn. He’s been holed up in his room all day doing who knows what. Probably forgot to eat, the big dumbo. Catch you later.”

I gave her a lazy wave, then stretched out on the sofa with a sigh of contentment, my trusty rifle and bone-steel bayonet by my side. The warmth from the fire flickering in the hearth enveloped me like a soft blanket. My eyelids grew heavy. I dozed off and, as my mother used to say, fell into dreamland.

At least, that’s where I thought I’d fallen. But the desolate rocky terrain, the bone-chilling dampness, the low moaning carried by the wind—they seemed too real to be just a dream. Real, and frightening. Somehow I had entered another world. I’d heard that eating pizza before bedtime can cause nightmares, but I didn’t think it could transport a person.

Then I heard a yell.

“Coming through!”

I spun to see Thor charging toward me like a runaway locomotive. Arms pumping and leather Daisy Duke shorts riding up where the sun don’t shine—dream or no, I wasn’t stupid enough to stand in the way of *that*. I leaped back as he blew past me, and then scrambled away even farther to avoid being clubbed by something bouncing along behind him. A tree—and was that a *harp*?—on a long rope attached to his ankle, near as I could make out.

“Well,” I murmured, “that just happened.”

I watched as Thor zigzagged through a hardscrabble landscape at the base of a jagged outcropping. Suddenly, there was a sharp bark. An enormous hound emerged from a cliff-top cave, far above Thor. As big as a Mack truck, with black fur dotted with red splotches, the dog stared down at the oblivious god and his toys-on-a-rope, panting with an openmouthed dog-smile on its face. It barked again—joyfully, I thought—then chased after Thor and the tree. Flecks of red dripped off its body as it picked its way down the steep incline.

I suddenly realized what the red splotches were: *blood*. The hound’s muzzle, fur, and paws were stained with it.

Recognition clicked in my brain as first Thor and then the hound disappeared in the distance. I stumbled back onto the nearest boulder and sat down hard.

“Garm,” I said aloud to myself. “The guardian dog of Helheim. And—”

“Your father’s killer.”

A woman spoke close to my ear. I whirled around. A kaleidoscope of colors spun and twisted before my eyes. When it cleared, I was no longer standing in a barren moonscape but in a grand hall next to a throne made out of charred logs. Gray drapes hung from the ceiling to the polished black marble floor. Grotesque bronze statues, the bodies contorted in postures of agony, sorrow, and terror, lined one wall. More statues lined the opposite wall, but these were rendered to express joy, love, and humor. I chose to look at that side.

A figure in a hooded ermine cloak appeared on the throne. The woman’s voice spoke again. “You’re not dreaming, einherji, but having a vision. You’re here in mind, not in body, and seeing recent events I’ve chosen for you to see.” She pushed back the hood and smiled.

“Oh,” I said. “Hel.”

I’d seen my share of horrors during the War Between the States. Rotting corpses torn apart by scavenger birds. Legless soldiers staring dead-eyed at the sky. Bloated, waterlogged remains floating in stagnant ponds.

The right half of Hel’s face beat them all. Blackened teeth, cataract-filmed eye, pocked skull, open ear hole. Not even the beauty of her left side—and it was stop-you-dead-in-your-tracks beautiful—could offset the horror of her ghoulish half.

She snapped her skeletal fingers. Double doors at the far end of the hall blew open. Two demons dragged a ghostly woman in chains before the throne and forced her to kneel. The woman lifted her head and glared daggers at Hel.

I sucked in a sharp breath.

The woman was my mother—my sweet mother, who sang me to sleep and smelled like warm corn bread and butter. I hadn’t seen her for more than a hundred years.

I choked back a sob. “*Mom.*” My mother’s gaze didn’t waver from Hel, and I remembered that my body was back on the hotel couch. To see her after so long, and for her not to see or hear me . . . it just about broke my heart.

Hel noted my reaction and smiled. “Oh, good. You still have feelings for her.”

“Feelings for who?” my mother demanded. “Who are you talking to?”

Hel ignored her. “So you won’t want her to suffer,” she said to me.

I stared at Hel with loathing. “Of course I don’t!”

“Who is going to suffer?” my mother cried.

“Then come to me, einherji,” Hel said. “In the flesh. I have a job that only a child of Tyr can do. Oh, and don’t tell a soul . . . or she will pay.”

Hel inclined her head. The demons pulled the chains in opposite directions. My mother’s body spasmed in pain. But her eyes never left Hel’s face, and she didn’t cry out.

I did.

I woke up on the sofa drenched in sweat, with the scream still in my throat and the vision of my mother suffering in my mind’s eye.

“Hang on, Mom. I’m coming!”

I grabbed my rifle and bayonet, ran down the hallway, and banged on Alex’s door. “I need tree access!” I bellowed. When Alex opened the door, I pushed past and shinnied up the trunk of the World Tree, searching for a branch to take me to Helheim.

**YARK!**

Ratatosk, the evil giant squirrel, was lying in wait. It let out a stream of insults that pummeled me like body blows to the psyche.

*You couldn’t help her when you were alive. You won’t save her now that you’re dead. Your friends mock you for hiding behind that ridiculous bayonet. They think you’re stupid. Weak. Brainless.*

I kept moving despite the barrage, but my thoughts sank deeper and deeper into a black pit of despair.

Suddenly, the insults ceased. I tumbled through an opening in a branch into Hel’s grand hall—for real this time. Hel was on her throne, but my mother and the demons were nowhere to be seen.

“I see you discovered the key: the despair that Ratatosk induces helps one gain access to my world,” the goddess said. “Now kneel before me, einherji.”

I hesitated, then did as the goddess of the dishonorable dead commanded. For my mother’s sake.

She studied me. “You are aware that my hellhound, Garm, will devour your father, Tyr, when Ragnarok is unleashed?”

I nodded.

“As Tyr’s spawn, you have his blood in your veins.”

I nodded again, wondering where this was going.

“Well. Garm has run off,” she told me. “You, son of Tyr, are the only one who can find him. Or rather”—she treated me to a ghastly smile—“he will find you.”

“I don’t follow.”

“Why, it’s very simple. My hellhound will smell the blood of Tyr and come running.”

I clutched my rifle more tightly. “So basically, you’re using me as bait.”

“More like a moving target,” Hel amended.

“Why me?” I dared to ask. “Why not just, I don’t know, poof Garm back to his cave yourself? Or send your demons to retrieve him?”

“Garm can be . . . elusive,” she said evasively. “He’s run off before, and past attempts to bring him home with magic and demons have failed.”

I was going to suggest she use a hellhound whistle, but I thought better of it. “If you don’t mind my asking, why not just let him stay lost?”

Hel’s expression darkened. “And risk word getting out that my dog is beyond my control? No. There is only one solution. You must lure him back to his cave.”

I scowled. “Let me guess. If I refuse, you torture my mother. If I tell anyone Garm didn’t come when you called, you torture my mother.”

“Oh yes. And Thomas . . . T.J. . . . if you think killing Garm will stop the hound from killing your father, think again. You cannot stop destiny. Now, away you go!”

The double doors blew open. I shouldered my rifle and set off to search for a lost dog in the land of the dishonorable dead.

One thing my earlier vision failed to reveal? The doomed residents of Helheim. As I crossed the landscape, their ghostly forms swirled and brushed up against me, as if sensing I didn’t belong in their afterlife. Most drifted off when I ignored them. But one ghost refused to leave me alone. It poked me repeatedly with something prickly.

“Listen, pal,” I snapped, turning to confront him, “I don’t know what your deal is, but . . .”

My voice died when I saw who’d been irritating me: the god Balder. The son of Odin and Frigg, Balder had been greatly beloved and, supposedly, invulnerable to all forms of attack. But he had one weakness: mistletoe. Loki had tricked Balder’s blind brother, Hod, into killing Balder with a mistletoe arrow—the same arrow he was now jabbing me with.

“Uh, hi,” I said. “Anytime you want to stop doing that is fine by me.”

Balder smiled, and I suddenly understood why the worlds had mourned his death. Young and handsome, with a mop of dark brown hair, sparkling blue eyes, and killer dimples on either side of his impish smile, Balder radiated warmth and good humor. Being near him made me feel happy. Plain and simple as that.

“Hi! You’re Tyr’s kid, right?”

I shouldn’t have been startled that he could speak—after all, I’m dead too and I can talk just fine—but I nearly jumped out of my skin when he did.

“Sorry about the poking,” Balder went on. “We don’t get many full-bodied visitors down here. That’s why I followed you. But when you didn’t react right away, I wasn’t sure you were real.”

I rubbed my sore arm. “I’m real.”

“I’m glad,” Balder said with another warm smile. “I always admired Tyr. Not because he let Fenris Wolf chomp off his hand while tying up that demon dog, but for how he handled himself with Odin and Thor.”

I nodded to show my understanding. Long, long, ago, Tyr had been the chief god of war. Over time, though, Odin and Thor rose in popularity and edged him out. My dad could have mounted an attack to regain his position, but he recognized the turmoil that civil war would have caused. So instead he stepped back and let Odin and Thor remain in power.

“Plus,” Balder added, “Tyr was one of the few gods who didn’t throw things at me to test my invulnerability. I always appreciated that.”

“Enough to save him from being devoured by Garm?” I asked hopefully.

Balder shook his head. “I can’t stop Garm from killing your father any more than I could stop this mistletoe arrow from killing me.”

“If you don’t mind my asking, why do you still have that thing?”

Balder pulled a face. “I tried to get rid of the arrow when I first got here. Burned it, buried it, crushed it with a rock, lost it accidentally on purpose. Nothing worked. It always reappeared back here.” He pointed to his chest. “Now I just carry it around. In my hand,” he added for clarity. “It gets in the way otherwise.”

“Mm, I can see how it would. And did the poison in the mistletoe ever make you sick?”

He looked at me with surprise. “Poison?”

“Well, yeah,” I said, equally surprised that he didn’t know. “Mistletoe is poisonous. There was this old hound dog that used to hang around my

regiment. One day it ate some mistletoe and—" I broke off.

"And what?" Balder asked anxiously. "The dog didn't die, did it? I hate stories where the dog dies!"

"No, but . . ." My mind was whirling. "It started walking funny and drooling and throwing up." I turned to him. "Balder, I need your help."

I told him about Garm, Thor, and my quest to find Hel's dog and save my mother from torture.

Balder shook his head. "I'm sorry, son of Tyr. I want to help you, but Hel would never permit me to intervene."

"Not you. That." I pointed to his arrow. "If Garm eats it, it might stop him. Not kill him," I added quickly, "just incapacitate him."

"It's true Garm wouldn't be killed. Not here, in Hel's realm. But if he ingests the mistletoe," Balder said, "maybe he won't feel like ingesting you!"

"Bonus," I agreed.

A loud baying cut through the stillness. A second later, Garm bounded over a hilltop. He sniffed the air and swiveled his massive head in my direction. The hound of Helheim had smelled me out.

I grabbed Balder's arrow. "You wouldn't happen to have a bow on you, by any chance?"

"Sorry. Fresh out."

"Right. Special delivery it is, then." I gripped my rifle in one hand and the arrow in the other. "Wish me luck!"

"I can't! Hel wouldn't approve!"

I didn't wait for Garm to come to me any more than I'd waited for Johnny Reb back in the war. Yelling at the top of my lungs, I ran full force at the hellhound.

Garm snarled and pounced. His bloodstained jaws opened wide, giving me an up close and personal view of his doggy uvula. I darted toward him, intending to shove the mistletoe into his mouth. His jaws snapped shut before I could, nearly taking off my hand when they did.

Then my battle training at Hotel Valhalla kicked into high gear. I spun away before he could take another bite, then jabbed my bayonet into his backside. He yelped loud enough to wake the dead. I pulled my bone-steel bayonet free and raced off in search of cover while he whirled in a circle, trying to lick his wound.

I spotted a ditch and jumped in. Flattening myself against the side, I plotted my next attack. I'd gotten as far as *avoid the snapping jaws* when I was enveloped in a blast of hot breath. I looked up to find Garm panting down at me, his drool-slick tongue hanging like a thick, wet blanket.

"Gross!" I rolled away just as that tongue tried to lap me up. Springing to my feet, I scrambled out of the trench and took a running leap onto Garm's neck—and immediately slipped on his blood-soaked fur and slid down the other side. I nicked him with the arrow, though, which must have been irritating, for he plunked down on his butt and vigorously scratched at his neck with his back paw.

Meanwhile, I ran across the field and hid behind a massive two-story-tall boulder, where I took stock of my situation. The straight-on attack had failed. Hiding in the ditch had been nearly fatal. So maybe it was time to take the high ground.

"Right," I growled. "This ends now."

One side of the boulder offered decent hand- and footholds. Silently thanking Hotel Valhalla for installing a climbing wall, I slung my rifle over my shoulder, stuck the arrow through my belt, and scaled my way to the top.

"Hey, you overgrown pugle," I bellowed from my perch, "how about a nice tasty Tyr-flavored treat? Yeah? You want a piece of me?"

Garm stopped scratching and started snarling. He padded over and circled the boulder. He tried to scramble up, but his paws couldn't find purchase.

"Looks like you're going hungry tonight!" I taunted.

Garm growled with frustration. Then, eyes locked on me, he backed away and got into a crouch.

I crouched too, slipping the arrow from my belt as I did. Then I waited.

Not for very long. With a loud howl, Garm charged. When he reached the boulder, he pounced. His muscular back legs sent him flying up the side straight at me, paws reaching out and mouth yawning wide.

At the last possible second, I stepped to the side. Then, with a cry of fury, I jammed the arrow straight down his gullet, yanking my hand free just before his teeth crushed it. My attack threw him off-balance, and he landed with a flop on top of the boulder. While he scrabbled to get his footing, I leaped to the ground and ran like Helheim back to where I'd first seen him: the rocky outcrop I assumed was his cave.

At first, Garm chased me at top speed. I stayed one step ahead with a combination of wily zigzagging maneuvers I'd perfected over centuries of combat on Valhalla's battlefield. That, and sheer dumb luck.

But slowly, the hellhound fell behind. I risked a look back. Garm's mouth foamed as the mistletoe's poison went to work. By the time we reached his cave, he was a wobbling, whimpering mess. I kind of felt bad for him.

All sympathy vanished when he threw up. Thankfully, it didn't splash on me, but the smell was really, really disgusting. Garm tottered into his cave, fell onto his doggy bed of crushed bones, and began snoring.

Balder wandered in then. Ignoring the puke, he pried open the dog's jaws, waded into its throat, and retrieved his arrow. "So I can wash it off before I wake up with it sticking out of my chest," he explained.

He was about to say something else. But whatever it was, I didn't hear it, because Hel chose that moment to send me back to Valhalla. I had no idea whether she would keep her promise to spare my mother.

I got my answer that night. The goddess of death visited me in a dream. "A job well done, son of Tyr," she said. "Your mother is safe. I may even grant you permission to visit her from time to time."

Warring emotions bubbled up in my gut then—anger at how my mother had been treated, and elation that one day I might get to see her again. Elation won out.

"I look forward to that," I said. "And I'm glad your dog is back home, even though he's destined to kill my dad. But right now, do me a favor." I rolled over and pulled up the covers. "Go to Helheim."



NIFLHEIM









# So's Your Face!

BY MALLORY KEEN

“DRAGON SCALES.”

Standing in the floor nineteen hallway, half-empty pizza box in hand, I glared at Halfborn Gunderson. He’d opened his door just a crack. “You’re seriously telling me you’re traveling to Vanaheim to get dragon scales?” I asked. “Straight off a dragon, no less?”

“It’s for a little project I’m working on.” The shirtless berserker avoided my eyes. Coward.

I tried to push my way in, but my on-again, off-again boyfriend set his massive foot against the slightly ajar door, making our relationship dangerously close to off again.

“That’s the way you want to play it? Fine.” I snatched a slice of pizza from the box, slapped him in the chest with it, and stormed off.

“Mallory! Wait!”

When I didn’t stop, Halfborn swore a blue streak and slammed his door. Maybe he was looking for his room key, planning to follow. Well, I didn’t want to see him or his pizza-stained chest anymore. So I bypassed my room, yanked open a random door, and stalked through, slamming it behind me.

Then I literally froze.

“Oh, Fimbulwinter.”

Hotel Valhalla has countless unmarked doors. Most are shortcuts to other areas of the hotel. A few lead to other worlds. Just my luck, I’d exited right into Niflheim, the land of endless sleet and ice, and plenty of frost giants. Even luckier, a blizzard was raging around me. Cursing, I dug a small square of fabric out of my pocket. Handmade by Blitzen, it unfolded into a thick hooded parka infused with kenaz (fire) magic, courtesy of Hearthstone. Ever since I’d journeyed to Niflheim to help stop Loki—long story—I made sure to carry it with me. Nestled in its warm embrace, I turned back and groped for the doorknob.

There wasn’t one. No door, either. Instead, I found myself peering at a mile-high wall of solid ice.

“A glacier? You have *got* to be kidding me.”

I scrubbed a circle in the frost and peered into the glacier to see . . . more ice. I pounded on the slab. Attacked it with my twin daggers. Kicked it and screamed at it. I worked up a good sweat, but if Hotel Valhalla was somewhere on the other side, I wasn’t getting back in the way I came out.

I sheathed my daggers, put a hand on the glacier, and began walking, trailing my fingers on the icy wall to feel for a door, a knob, a window—something. Then the wall ended and my frozen fingers plunged into a massive snowdrift.

Growling with frustration, I shoved my hands in my pockets and turned back. The glacier was the only connection I had to the hotel, and I didn’t

want to lose sight of it. I'd only gone a few steps when I heard a muffled thudding in the distance. I paused. The thudding grew louder and closer.

*Frost giant.*

The possibility struck me like a slushball in the face. I knew from past experience that some frost giants were friendly. They weren't the ones I was worried about.

A solitary figure loomed into view through the driving snow. My first thought was *How can he not be freezing in those short-shorts?* My second was *Jump!*

I leaped to one side as Thor pounded past.

"Hey! Wait!" I started after him, but immediately skidded to a halt. Thor was letting out farts like a sputtering engine. A cloud of noxious fumes enveloped me.

"Gods of Asgard!" I waved a hand in front of my face. "What crawled up inside him and died?"

Coughing, eyes smarting, I almost failed to recognize the one plus of the situation. Ever hear the phrase *like a hot knife through butter*? Well, substitute *fart stream* for *knife* and *snow drifts* for *butter*. Thor's gas was melting a wide trail that made walking through Niflheim a hundred times easier. I figured he would eventually end up in Asgard, so I followed in his smelly wake.

Unfortunately, Thor was too fast for me to keep up. Then the blizzard filled in his trail, obliterating it completely. I swallowed my rising panic and pushed on through the stinging snow.

For a while, all I heard was the whine of the wind and my own heavy breathing. But then a new sound entered the mix. A gurgling, like water. I stopped, thinking. Water might mean a river or a stream. Maybe I could follow it out of Niflheim? With Thor's trail gone, it seemed like my best option. I detoured and headed toward the sound.

The air gradually warmed. I quickened my pace. The driving snow changed into fat, wet flakes that gave way to a thick gray mist. I took off my parka, folded it back into a square, and stuck it in my pocket.

The gurgling changed too, to a bubbling, like water coming to a boil. I paused. Good thing I did. The fog parted momentarily to reveal a vast steaming body of water directly ahead of me. A few more strides and I'd have stepped off a steep bank into its inky black depths.

*What is this place?* My mind sifted through my knowledge of the Nine Worlds and came up with the answer. *It's Hvergelmir, the hot spring surrounding the roots of Yggdrasil! Yes!*

I did a little happy dance. If I could get to the tree's roots, I could climb Yggdrasil back to Asgard or some other, more hospitable world.

Peering through the mist, I could just make out the twisted and humped roots sticking out of the black water like the knees of cypress trees—only much, much bigger. I caught a quick glimpse of Yggdrasil's trunk stretching skyward from their midst before the steam shrouded it from my view.

So, my Niflheim exit was out there. Getting to it, however, presented some problems. I'm a decent swimmer, but I wasn't convinced I could make it across Hvergelmir without being boiled alive by the hot spring water. With my einherji power, I could have tried jumping the whole expanse. But the mist made it difficult to see where the water ended and the roots began. If I misjudged the distance, who knew where I might land.

*There's got to be a way,* I thought. I circled the pool. On the opposite side, I spotted an undulating root stretching to the shoreline like a long section of roller coaster. It was treacherously slick with humidity and green moss. But it was the only bridge I could see over the water.

Sweat beading down my face and hands feeling for purchase, I crawled across the root inch by inch. After what seemed an eternity, I reached the other side. I rolled off onto moist loamy earth. I picked my way through the outer roots and sat against one near Yggdrasil to catch my breath.

The root twitched. Gasping, I scrambled back. Nothing in my memory banks said Yggdrasil could move.

I looked closer at the root. It was brown and green, but unlike the other, mossy roots twisting around it, this root looked decidedly scaly. While my mind processed that fact, I heard a chewing sound. My heart sank.

*It's not a root. It's Nidhogg's tail.*

In my rush to get to Yggdrasil, I'd forgotten about Nidhogg, the dragon that lives at the World Tree's base. Nidhogg spends his days gnawing on the tree's roots and trading taunts with an eagle that nests in the treetops. Ratatosk, the gigantic insult squirrel, acts as go-between, delivering messages from roots to treetop and back again.

Now, I myself am a fan of the barbed word. Insults come in handy with an oafish lout like Halfborn. But to cast aspersions upon one another for

millennia, the way the eagle, dragon, and squirrel do? I'd never let our relationship reach that level of dysfunction.

Nidhogg's green-and-brown body was coiled around the base of the tree. To climb out of Niflheim via Yggdrasil, I'd first have to climb over Nidhogg. That prospect did not thrill me, especially when I spied the claws on his powerful back legs. I moved to look for the dragon's head—*always know where the dangerous mouth parts are*, is my motto—and put my foot right into a pile of bones. *Crunch!* Apparently, Yggdrasil's roots weren't the only things Nidhogg gnawed on.

I unsheathed my daggers, expecting the dragon to attack at the sound. Instead, he muttered to himself.

"That eagle thinks he's all that. Well, my new insult will be so scathing he'll molt his feathers. Now all I have to do is think it up."

A gleam of hope sparked inside me. Nidhogg needed an insult? I had a million of them. Maybe we could cut a deal—one eagle-bashing zinger for safe passage up the tree. No guarantee Nidhogg wouldn't devour me on sight, of course, but it was the only plan I had, so I went for it.

I kicked a rib cage off my foot and swaggered around the tree as if I owned the place. "Hey there!"

Startled, Nidhogg stopped in mid-mutter. He stared at me, his huge yellow eyes blinking in confusion. Then, nostrils flaring dangerously, he let out a bellow that doubled as an impressive display of razor-sharp fangs.

My heart faltered, but I swallowed my fear and pressed on.

"Is that supposed to intimidate me?" I made a big show of rolling my eyes. "I've heard louder roars from Thor's butt."

Nidhogg flinched as if I'd whacked him on the nose with a rolled-up newspaper. "That wasn't very nice." He sounded so hurt I almost felt sorry for him.

Instead, I snorted with derision. "Buddy, I insult everyone." I waved my daggers. "See these? They're sharp, but not as sharp as my tongue." *Or your fangs*, I added to myself as the dragon loomed in closer to inspect my blades.

"Wow. Those *are* pointy." Nidhogg looked genuinely impressed. "Are your insults really sharper than that?"

"Mister, that question is so dumb it makes me think your brain is like Odin's left eye socket—completely empty."

Nidhogg winced. "Wow. That really, really hurt. But you're right, of course." He tapped a daggerlike claw against his skull. "My brain is empty.

Of insults, anyway.”

That was my opening. I sheathed my daggers and cocked my head to one side as if considering something. “You know, I have some powerful one-liners that never fail to infuriate. I’d be willing to share a few, but what’s in it for me?”

Nidhogg scratched his belly. “Well, for starters, I won’t eat you,” he offered.

“Hmm. Tell you what. Let me climb up Yggdrasil when we’re done, and you’ve got a deal.”

Nidhogg stuck out a claw. I thought he was going to slice me to ribbons, but then I realized he wanted to shake on it. I did so, very carefully.

“Okay,” I said, “now listen closely.”

Nidhogg swept down and pressed his ear to my mouth.

“Not that closely.”

“Sorry.” He backed off.

“Right. Let’s start with the four classic retorts: One: *I know you are, but what am I?* Two: *I’m rubber, you’re glue—whatever you say bounces off me and sticks to you.* Three: *Takes one to know one.* And four: *So’s your face!*”

Nidhogg’s eyes widened with astonishment. “Those are *brilliant!*” His bellow blew my hair back. “Let’s test them out.”

I shrugged. “You are one ugly snake.”

Nidhogg recoiled, the wounded expression back on his face.

“That was your cue to use one of the retorts,” I explained.

His face cleared. “Oh yeah! Ha-ha!”

“Let’s try again. You are one ugly snake.”

“I know I am, but what are you?” He smiled with delight.

*I am never getting out of here*, I thought. Out loud, I said, “Let’s go over that wording again.”

After a few more sample rounds, Nidhogg got the hang of it. By then I was enjoying myself, so I threw in some simple bird-themed taunts for him to use against the eagle: *You’re so loony, cuckoos think you’re crazy!, No birds of a feather would want to flock together with you!, and I heard you taste like chicken!*

In retrospect, that last one might have been a mistake. When Nidhogg heard it, his stomach growled. He gave me a sideways, hungry look. “So, um, want to stay for dinner?”

I casually sidled away from his mouth region. “Much as I’d love to, I should get back to Valhalla. Okay if I climb up over your coils now?”

“I’m rubber, you’re glue!”

I took that as consent.

I’d never been happier to feel Yggdrasil’s bark beneath my fingers. I scurried up the trunk, scrambled through the branches, and finally found an opening to another world. I didn’t know which one it was until I tumbled out onto floor nineteen, right at Halfborn’s feet.

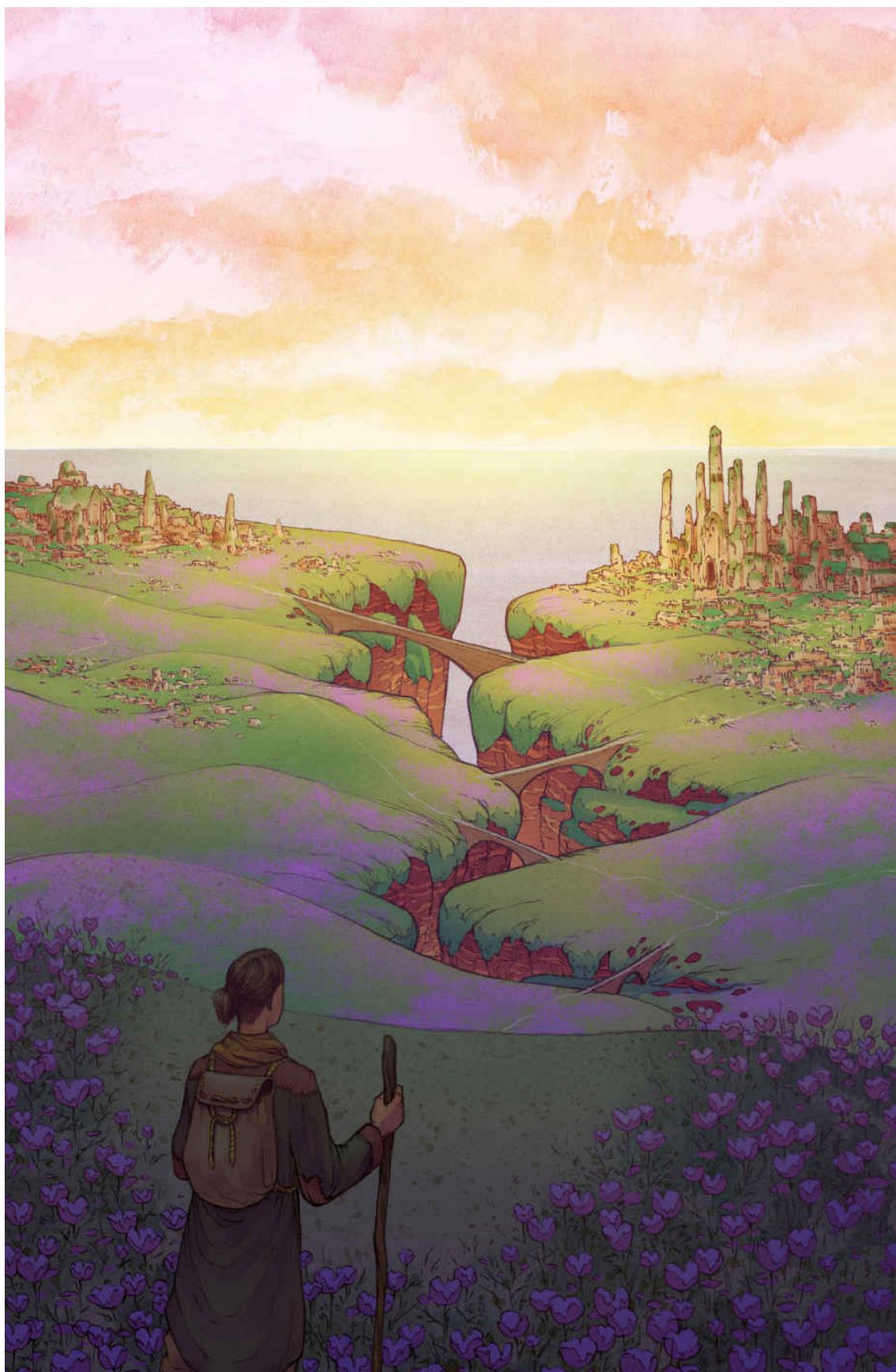
“Mallory!” he yelled. “I’ve been looking all over for you, woman! You are the most reckless, foolhardy einherji—”

I got to my feet and glared at him. Then I hurled myself into his arms. “Oh yeah?” I murmured against his bare chest. “Well . . . takes one to know one.”



VANAHEIM









# Well, That Was a Surprise

BY HALFBORN GUNDERSON

SOMEONE STOOD in the hallway outside my door. I tensed. Waiting. Listening.

*Knock-knock. Knock. Knock-knock-knock.*

That was the sign. I opened the door. “Get in. Quickly.”

Alex Fierro skirted past me with a bundled-up towel in his arms. I glanced up and down the hallway, then closed the door. I turned to find Alex

rolling his eyes.

"I still can't believe you made me use a secret knock." He handed me the towel, then dusted off his pink cashmere sweater vest and lime-green pants.

I showed him a mangled slice of pizza. "Mallory tried to get in a few minutes ago. I had to be sure it was you and not her coming back to trash the place."

"Yeah, your peephole wouldn't work at all."

"Oh. I forgot about that. Anyway."

I led him into my arts-and-crafts room. That's right—arts and crafts. There's more to me than just fighting to the death. I'd started with the basics—finger paints and macaroni sculptures, glitter glue on paper hearts, string art and coat-hanger mobiles—and worked my way up to finer artistic endeavors.

Alex gaped when he saw my latest project. "Dude. It's *huge*."

I shrugged. "Go big or go home, right?"

The project was a mosaic for Mallory made from an assortment of found and recycled objects: weapon fragments, pebbles from different worlds, shards of shattered glass. Alex, floor nineteen's resident potter, had brought me pieces of broken pottery, which he'd handcrafted by hurling unsatisfactory pots against a wall.

I unrolled the towel and inspected the shards. "These are perfect. Thanks. Now I just need Vanir dragon scales."

"Why Vanir dragons?" Alex wanted to know.

"They're red, yellow, and orange—perfect for battlefield flames, blood, and gore. See, I'm depicting Mallory's and my first battle together."

"Aw, Halfborn." Alex chuckled under the chin. "You're a romantic!" "I'm also behind schedule. I want to give it to her on the battle's anniversary next week. I gotta get to Vanaheim and back before Mallory really *does* break down my door."

Alex uncoiled his garrote from his belt. "Want a wingman?"

"Nah. I got this." I opened a closet full of weapons and selected an ax and a shield from my collection. "Could you stay here, though, and make sure Mallory doesn't get in?"

Alex grimaced. "I'd rather fight a dragon than face your angry girlfriend, but sure, I'll hang out here until you get back."

"Thanks. I owe you one."

Alex smiled. "I'll take you up on that sometime."

Weapons securely in place over my TOUGH MUDDER T-shirt—I love those Midgard obstacle-course challenges—I made my way through the hotel hallways to the kitchen and the enormous walk-in refrigerator in the feast hall food-prep area. The quickest way to Vanaheim was via fresh produce. I went feetfirst into the potato bin and landed at the bottom of a gentle rolling hill in Folkvanger, the Vanir realm of the afterlife.

I surveyed my surroundings. The hill was covered with sweet-smelling wildflowers and dancing butterflies awash in warm, glowing light—the power of Freya, goddess and ruler of Vanaheim, washing over the realm. On the hilltop, Freya's handpicked warriors lounged on blankets, laughing and sipping chai.

I scowled. Peace, butterflies, chai: this world was awful.

*Eeeeeeeeeee!*

A high-pitched trumpet blast suddenly pierced the air. A cry to battle! My berserker instincts kicked in as if someone had flipped an ON switch. With a mighty roar, I tore off my TOUGH MUDDER tee and charged up the hill.

Nothing I'd ever encountered in Asgard prepared me for what came next.

The trumpet blast segued into a soft jazz tune. Brush drumsticks shushed out a whispered rhythm while other instruments—a piano, a clarinet, a bass guitar—wove a melody of notes through the air. The lilting music rolled over me like warm syrup on a stack of Sunday brunch pancakes.

It was horrible. I dropped my ax, fell to my knees, and clutched my ears.

“Whoa, buddy! You okay?” A dark-haired girl in a bikini top and sarong stared over at me with concern. She poked her blanket-mate with her elbow. “Hey. I think this dude needs some herbal supplements.”

“No!” I stumbled to my feet. “I’m fine. Just point me toward Sessrumnir, and I’ll be on my way.”

“You’ll miss the clarinet improv solo,” she warned.

I shuddered. “No, I really won’t.”

The girl shrugged. “Your loss. Freya’s palace is down the hill, past the volleyball court. Keep calm and bebop on!”

“Who was that?” I heard her friend ask as I hurried away.

“From the looks of him, I’d say someone who likes”—she lowered her voice to an embarrassed whisper—“polka music.”

(She wasn’t wrong. Give me a good oompah band over what they were listening to any day.)

I continued on to Sessrumnir, Freya's upside-down ship/palace of gold and silver, to seek the goddess's permission to hunt the dragons of her land. Inside, warriors lined the aisle to Freya's throne. Dozing warriors in hammocks, that is. Freya's throne was empty.

I shook a sleeping blond man in an unbuttoned Hawaiian shirt, tattered Bermuda shorts, and Birkenstock sandals. "Wake up. Where's Freya?"

The guy blinked sleepily. "Who are you?"

"Halfborn. Where's the goddess?"

"Halfborn." The guy said my name like he was testing it out. "What's that short for?"

"Nothing."

He chuckled in amazement. "Halfborn is short for Nothing? It's so *weird* how names work, isn't it?" He stuck out his hand. "I'm Miles. And sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but Freya's not here right now. I'd be super-pumped to help you out, though. Speaking of super-pumped"—he pointed to my bulging biceps and six-pack abs—"did you get ripped like that by going vegan?"

I ignored his question and got right to my own. "Whose permission do I need to hunt your dragons? I need some of their scales."

Miles scratched his head in confusion. "Hunt our dragons? Dude, they sleep harder than our warriors do. I mean, it'd take something pretty substantial to wake them up. You want scales, just walk up and take them."

Most people would have been relieved when a potentially deadly task turned out to be non-life-threatening. I am not most people. I prefer to earn things, not have them handed to me. Still, I'd come for dragon scales, so I set my disappointment aside.

"Where are the caves of these sleeping dragons, then?"

"Caves." Miles laughed. "You're really not from around here, are you?"

"No." *Thank the gods*, I added silently.

Miles spread his arms out wide and looked up. "Our dragons slumber under the open sky, basking in the light of Freya." He dropped his arms. "Come on, I'll take you there."

"No! I mean, you could just point the way."

"It's no trouble, man. Follow me."

I gritted my teeth. "Super."

Miles led me toward a distant canyon of soft red-gold sandstone. "I know! Let's take this opportunity to get to know one another better."

“Let’s not and say we did.”

“I’ll go first,” Miles continued. “My favorite flower is the daisy. It’s just so darned cheerful! Do you have a favorite flower, Halfborn?”

“No.”

“Oh, come on, now.” He glanced at me sideways. “You must like tulips. Everyone likes tulips. Know why?”

“No.”

“Because without tulips, you couldn’t kiss!” He whooped and shoulder-bumped me. “Get it? Tulips? Like, *two lips?*” He made kissy sounds.

I nearly unleashed a heavy dose of berserk on him. Instead, I said, “There is one plant I admire. The Venus flytrap.”

Miles nodded enthusiastically. “Interesting! Why that one, exactly?”

I turned on him. “Because it attacks its prey and then slowly and painfully consumes it.”

That shut him up.

We reached the canyon. The wind had carved one side into wavy ledges that hung over the floor like shade canopies. Four dragons—one gold, one red, and two orange—snored in a hollow at the bottom, their scales glowing in the Freya light. Their wings were tucked in tight to their serpentine bodies. White smoke puffed from their nostrils like balls of cotton.

In other words, the dragons were non-life-threatening. Helping myself to their scales would be a piece of cake.

“I hate cake,” I murmured as I started down the incline. Lucky me—Miles came along.

We were halfway down when a figure barreled over the canyon’s edge on the far side.

Miles blinked. “Hey, that’s Thor. And he’s— Oh!”

Thor charged straight through the dragons.

Apparently, being kicked by a thunder god constitutes *something pretty substantial*. The dragons awoke with loud snorts. The clan erupted in chaos. Powerful wings flapping, the foursome took to the air, screeching in fury.

I darted beneath a sandstone overhang.

“Ooh, pretty!” Miles shaded his eyes and pointed at the dragons.

“Are you crazy?” I yelled. “Take cover!”

Miles waved his hand dismissively. “No need, my friend. The dragons would never attack the honored dead of Folkvanger. Doing so would disrupt the peace of the realm. They’ll just fly around a bit and then go back to

sleep.” Then a look of mild concern crossed his face. “Of course, you’re not one of Freya’s chosen slain. If they’re hungry and they smell you— Oh, look. There’s something you don’t see every day.”

“What?”

“Fire breath.”

I flung my shield up in front of me just as the orange dragons swooped past my overhang. Their flames superheated the metal but didn’t touch me. They flew on and circled back for another pass.

*This is more like it,* I thought.

I leaped out and went to rip off my TOUGH MUDDER tee. Then I remembered that I’d ripped it off earlier, so I went straight to going berserk.

I raced down to the canyon floor. One orange dragon landed next to me. A few well-placed swings of my ax took it out of commission permanently. I dodged a burst of fire from the second orange one, then darted in and whacked off its head.

“Doused that flame!” I cried.

“Dude!” Miles was scrambling out of the canyon. “You’ve got anger issues!”

“I know!”

The cranberry-red dragon gave a shriek of rage and dive-bombed me. It came a little too close for comfort. *Its* comfort, that is. I delivered a knockout blow to its nose with my shield, then cleaved its skull in two.

“Bring it on!” I bellowed.

The last dragon was by far the biggest. Its glinting gold scales nearly blinded me as it rushed in for the kill. I sidestepped, leaped onto its back, and rode it into the annoyingly beautiful Freya-light-drenched sky. The dragon bucked, writhed, and barrel-rolled, trying to unseat me. I put my ax handle across its throat and pulled back hard. It gasped and clawed at the handle, but I hung on tight. Then it stopped thrashing and spun in a slow death spiral to the canyon floor.

*Boom!* Its body kicked up a cloud of sand.

“Aaahhhrrrrr!” Roaring in triumphant glory, I leaped off and pounded my shield with my ax.

“Dude. Whoa.”

I looked up to find Miles staring at me openmouthed in astonishment. Around him was a crowd of Vanaheim warriors. A few shifted and murmured uneasily.

The dark-haired girl in the bikini top moved forward. “They’re . . . dead.” A tear traced down her cheek.

It occurred to me then that while she, Miles, and the rest of Freya’s chosen were technically warriors, they might never have seen an actual battle, let alone been in one.

“Well, yes, they’re dead,” I said carefully. “But if they’d succeeded in charbroiling and eating me, then *I’d* be dead. For good.”

The girl looked at me blankly.

“Because I’m an einherji.”

The girl still looked puzzled.

“If I die outside Valhalla, I stay dead. Unlike the dragons who, being mythical creatures, will vanish into Ginnungagap and eventually be reborn.”

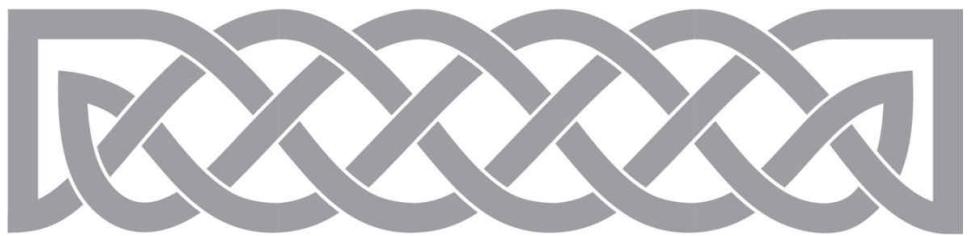
The girl’s face cleared. “The dragons will be reborn?” She grabbed her friend’s hands and started jumping up and down and squealing. “We’ll have baby dragons here soon. *Sooooo* cute!” She beamed at me. “Thank you so much for killing them!”

“Yeah. Don’t mention it.”

Miles came forward then. He looked from the dragons’ hacked-up and pulverized bodies to my ax and sweaty, blood-streaked torso. Then he looked down at his own rangy frame and back to the bodies. He nodded with understanding.

“So . . . your secret is the caveman paleo diet, not veganism, huh?”

I thumped my chest. “Caveman paleo all the way, my man. Now if you’ll excuse me.” I hefted my ax and raked some scales from each dragon onto my shield. “I have a mosaic to finish.”



MUSPELLHEIM









# I Play with Fire

BY ALEX FIERRO

“AWWW, YOU two are so cute together it makes me sick. So I’m going back to my own room.”

I’m not sure Mallory and Halfborn even heard me when I left, they were lip-locking so hard. Seeing them like that almost made me miss Magnus. Almost.

He was away visiting his cousin, Annabeth Chase. She'd advised him to leave his magic sword, Jack—aka Sumarbrander, the Sword of Summer—with me. So, while Mallory and Halfborn were smooching, I returned to my room to hang out with a talking blade.

Jack was slumbering on the decorative sword stand Blitzen had recently handcrafted for him. At least, I think he was slumbering. Hard to tell with a sword. No eyes.

I'd been working on a new pot when Halfborn had called looking for some shards. Now I returned to my wheel. As I worked the slick spinning clay under my fingers, I felt myself undergo a subtle shift.

I'd been identifying as male when I was with Mallory and Halfborn, and earlier, when I was with Samirah and her fiancé, Amir. Now I was female. And yes, the change really is that simple sometimes. Hence the term *gender fluid*.

I was deep into my new pot when Jack suddenly leaped up from his stand. The runes running down his blade pulsed an alarming red.

"*Señor! Señor!*" he cried. Then he paused as if looking at me. Again, hard to tell because of the whole no-eyes thing. Regardless, he picked up on my gender change. "Sorry. *Señorita! Señorita!*"

"Jack, chill. Take a breath. Wait. . . . Do you breathe?"

"No time for that now! I just heard a rumor via the underground weapon network that Surt, the fire lord of Muspellheim, is hatching a new nefarious plot!"

"Oh my gods!" I cried. "There's an underground weapon network?"

"Of course there is!" Jack retorted. "Think about it. What's the one thing all Nine Worlds have in common?"

"Thor's footprints and lingering fart stench?"

"Well . . . yes. But the answer I was looking for is *weapons*. And we talk. Gossip, really, if you want to know the truth. So, I heard the rumor about Surt from your garrote, who heard it from an arrow in Alfheim, who heard it from a mace in Jotunheim, who heard it from a vegetable peeler in Vanaheim, who—"

"A vegetable peeler?"

Jack shuddered. "Hope that you never hear a carrot screaming as it is being flayed by that dread instrument of torture, *chica*. Anyway, the communiqué traces all the way back to Muspellheim."

From the way he was slicing back and forth through the air, I could see that Jack was truly agitated. I was afraid he might pop a rune or something if I didn't start taking him seriously. Plus, Magnus trusted Jack with his life—literally—so that meant I trusted Jack, too.

I went to the bathroom sink to wash my hands. “Okay, what is Surt’s plot?”

Jack sank his pommel down onto my couch and leaned his blade back against the cushions. “I don’t have the details. But if it’s Surt, it can’t be good.”

“So what are we waiting for?” I dried my hands on a towel embroidered with the hotel’s initials, HV, then tossed it in the general direction of the hamper. “Sheath up and let’s hit the tree.”

“No! I can’t go! I—I won’t be able to resist the Black One.”

Jack sounded miserable, and I remembered something Magnus had told me, about how, come Ragnarok, the Black One was destined to wield Jack and free Fenris Wolf. When they last encountered Surt, Jack had felt the pull of destiny and practically leaped out of Magnus’s grasp to join the fire lord. If Jack came near Surt again without Magnus there to hold him back . . .

“Hey, no, of course you can’t,” I said hurriedly. “You stay here, safe and sound and Surt-free. Sam’s back from her special assignment, so I’ll grab her, and we’ll get Hearth and Blitz and—”

Jack flew to a few inches in front of my face, his runes flashing in a jarring disco-light display. “No! Surt can detect einherjar and elves, dwarves and Valkyries. You must do this alone.”

I waved my hands in the air. “Um, hello? Aren’t you forgetting one little detail? *I’m* an einherji. What’s to prevent Surt from sniffing me out?”

Jack went quiet again. “Use your shape-shifting powers. You’ll be okay if you keep changing form,” he finally said. “Plus, your gender fluidity will throw him off. He won’t be able to get a lock on you.”

I raised an eyebrow. “No offense, but you don’t sound too sure about that.”

“I am sure! Well, pretty sure, anyway. Sort of.”

Not exactly confidence-inducing. But I couldn’t just sit around while the Black One hatched a sinister plan of some sort. I’d had enough of that kind of thing in my afterlife already, thank you very much. If there was a chance I could stop him before he started, I had to take it.

So I looped my special golden garrote—the one the goddess Sif had given to me—around my waist. I moved to my atrium, intending to climb through the World Tree until I hit an entrance to Muspellheim, but Jack stopped me.

“Take the service elevator,” he advised. “I hear the captain of the Valkyries once got blowtorched when the doors opened, so it must lead right to Muspellheim.”

That tidbit of info gave me pause. “Quick question, disco sword: What’s to keep me from being turned into einherji flambé when I use that elevator? Or while I’m roaming through Muspellheim, for that matter?”

“Um . . . any chance your sweater vest is fire-resistant?”

“No. It’s cashmere.”

“Oh. Well, I’m out of ideas.”

I was too, until my gaze landed on my kiln. Gas fueled, it looked like a steel trash can with squat legs and a pop-up lid. The interior could reach temperatures northward of two thousand degrees—perfect for turning squishy clay pots into hard-baked earthenware. A thick layer of ceramic insulation protected me and my room from the extreme heat.

*With a bit of magic, I thought, I bet I could transform some of those fibers into something that will shield me from Muspellheim’s fire.*

I was no rune master like Hearthstone, but I was no stranger to magic, either. When I was alive, my mom, Loki (don’t ask), had taught me an enchantment that turned my clay-cutter into a deadly garrote. More recently, I’d brought a ceramic warrior named Pottery Barn to life with just a touch of my fingers.

To create my shape-shifting fire shield, I combined a handful of fibers with my signature Urnes symbol—intertwined snakes that represented flexibility—and an *algiz* stone I hastily borrowed without asking from Hearthstone’s rune bag. (If he didn’t want me to take it, then why did he leave his room unlocked?) I focused on turning the three things into an invisible membrane that surrounded me like a second skin.

To my delight—okay, amazement—it worked. Even better, the membrane changed shape when I did. In the ultimate test, I fired up the kiln, turned into a housefly, and, with Jack hovering anxiously nearby, plunged inside. I emerged completely unsinged.

It was time to get going. “Stay safe, disco sword.”

Jack bobbed over to my potted snake plant and hid in the broad, sword-shaped leaves. “You too.”

I turned into an ant on the short elevator ride down to Muspellheim. A blast of fire engulfed me when the doors opened. If not for my membrane, I would have exploded like a kernel of unpopped corn.

“Nice welcome,” I muttered.

Judging by the opulent surroundings—gold- and ebony-paneled walls, vaulted ceilings that glowed like embers, and several red, orange, and black silk tapestries depicting the same handsome but cruel man lording over dancing fire demons—I hadn’t landed in some obscure Nowheresville but right in the heart of Surt’s palace itself.

I squared my thorax with determination. *Okay. Time to get crawling!*

After going about five feet in ten minutes, I came to my senses and changed into a housefly. I made much better time after that.

I found the Black One in a large meeting room. Elegant, long-fingered hands clasped behind his back, not a single black hair out of place, he stood staring out a huge picture window at the fiery landscape below. Seated at the table were several gods and goddesses I didn’t recognize. So how did I know they were deities? They weren’t covered in flames, so they weren’t fire giants or demons. They weren’t bothered by the heat, either—no screaming or sizzling or burning to a crispy crunch. Logical conclusion? They were immortals.

Surt turned, and I had to choke back a laugh. With his black-on-black-on-black attire, equally black features, and fierce black expression, he should have been intimidating. But his nose was so tiny—he was growing a new one, Magnus having sliced off his old snout in an earlier encounter—that he came off as more ridiculous than fearsome.

The lord of fire moved with the grace of a ballroom dancer to stand at the head of the table. He pressed his fingertips to the surface. The room quieted. Then Surt spoke—and suddenly, he didn’t seem so ridiculous anymore. His deep voice thrummed in my mind, pushing at my thoughts as if trying to replace them with his own. Swaying me to his way of thinking.

*No wonder Jack was so desperate to go to him, I thought. If the deities fall under his spell . . .*

Luckily, my willpower has withstood an even greater manipulator: my mother, Loki. (Again, don’t ask.) Carefully, so as not to draw attention to

myself, I pushed back against Surt's voice. Its power slowly ebbed away until my mind was once again my own, and I could listen to his words.

"Odin, Thor, Frey, Loki," Surt said. "They're all so focused on the coming of Ragnarok that they've forgotten what comes afterward. A new world!" He raised his arms and stood silhouetted against the picture window. "A new world will emerge when the floodwaters recede, the fires die, the ice storms melt, and the earthquakes cease!"

He dropped his arms and his voice, and leaned forward on the table again. "That world will need gods, my friends. You could be those gods. You, who Odin and his lot have forgotten, could take their places . . . if I deem you worthy of fighting on the right side of the war come Ragnarok. *My* side."

While Surt was orating, I studied the deities. They were a mixed bag, some ancient-looking and in traditional Viking garb, others more youthful and wearing clothes from more recent centuries. Their appearances gave no indication of their identity, making me long for the name tags worn by the Hotel Valhalla staff. Whoever they were, they were hanging on Surt's every word.

Then Surt abruptly stopped talking. Frowning, he lifted his chin. His nostrils flared. Then he swung his head around and zeroed in on my hiding spot.

I swore silently. I'd forgotten to keep changing shape, and the fire lord had sniffed me out. I couldn't shape-shift now, not with Surt staring directly at me.

A chair scraped the floor. "What the blue blazes is that?" a goddess cried in astonishment. I assumed she had spotted me, but then she and the others rushed to the window. One jostled Surt. When he turned to glare at the offender, I shape-shifted into a flea and leaped to another location.

From my new vantage point, I had a perfect view of the disturbance outside. Thor was running past, sweating bullets and yelling "Ow-ow-ow-ow-ow" with every footfall. And no wonder—the ground in Muspellheim was covered in lava (and not the pretend kind like in the leap-on-the-furniture-don't-touch-the-lava game).

Surt stalked to the window. I expected him to open it and blast Thor with a fireball, but he just yanked the black silk drapes shut. "Show's over," he barked. "If you would all resume your seats, you may now state your worthiness to join me at Ragnarok."

The first god stood up. Balding, sweaty, with a stomach that protruded over his belt, he reminded me of a foreman on a low-budget infrastructure project.

“THE NAME’S HOLLER!” he bellowed. “GOD OF DISEASE, DESTRUCTION, AND DISASTER! LET ME PLAY FOR YOUR TEAM, AND I WILL STRIKE DOWN THE MASSES WITH DEVASTATING HEAD COLDS! THEN I’LL FOLLOW UP WITH A LEAKY-FAUCET EPIDEMIC AND A RASH OF TEETH-RATTLING POTHOLES!”

“Interesting.” Surt scratched a few notes on a yellow legal pad. “Next?”

A pinched-faced spinster type with ramrod-straight posture rose from her chair and smoothed out her pinafore. “I am Snotra.”

Once again, I almost gave myself away by laughing. I changed into a cockroach—for some reason, I was defaulting to bugs—and skittered beneath a sideboard.

Snotra reminded the others that she was the goddess of prudence and self-discipline. “I will make sure the giants attack in an orderly fashion. No cutting the line. No horsing around. No”—she drew herself up and tightened her thin lips disapprovingly—“gum-chewing. And I will organize a chore chart of post-Ragnarok duties.”

“Mmm,” Surt murmured. “Quite . . . fastidious of you.”

The other deities stood up in turn. Some, like Snotra and Holler, had actual plans to propose. The rest were prepared to throw in with Surt because they had grievances with the current gods in power.

Forseti, the cigar-smoking god of justice, complained about not being part of Odin’s inner circle. “The All-Fadda kept me outta the big decisions, like where and how to tie up Loki, you know? I’m with you, though, new world comes, and then *boom!* I’ll be the big cheese in charge—present company excluded, of course, my lord,” he added hurriedly when Surt frowned.

The goddess Glum, who looked and sounded exactly like her name, was one of Frigg’s handmaidens. “I’m just so *tired* of being in her shadow all the time,” she said. “I want to have a chance to shine.”

“And what would you do if given that chance?” Surt prodded.

Glum stared at him. “Do?”

A goddess in a dowdy shirt and shapeless skirt cupped Glum’s face in her hand and gave it an affectionate shake. “Pretty young thing like you, you don’t need to *do*. You need someone to *do for* you. A husband!” She glanced

over at Forseti, then leaned close to Glum. “I’m Lofn,” she whispered, “goddess of arranged marriages.” She handed her a business card. “Call me. We’ll talk.”

More gods and goddesses introduced themselves. I hadn’t heard of any of them, which made me a little sad. I know what it’s like to be pushed aside. It stinks.

And yet, with each new deity that spoke, my tension grew.

*They might be a motley crew, I reminded myself, but they still add to Surt’s power.*

I had to get them to come back to our side. Or at least not join his. But how?

Surt began detailing his plans for his new world order. Once again, the deities fell under the spell of his hypnotic voice. I had to find a way to break that spell.

Then it hit me: I’d put a bug in their ears. Literally.

I changed into a gnat and flew near Snotra. “Surt thrives in chaos,” I whispered in her ear. “Do you really think he’ll let you create order?”

To Holler, I murmured, “What place will a god of destruction have in a new world, where the goal is to build?”

“Surt will expect something from you,” I breathed in Glum’s ear. “Do you really want that kind of pressure?”

Around the table I went, sowing whispered seeds of dissent. When I’d finished, the deities were looking at Surt with suspicion.

The Black One sensed the change in attitude. He slowly rose from his seat. “My friends, you have outlined what you have to offer. Now perhaps you need a reminder of what *I* bring to the table.”

He thrust his hand in the air and summoned his sword of pure white flame. The gods and goddesses cowered. Throwing his head back and laughing, Surt grew to his full giant size. “You minor, forgotten, *pathetic* deities! So easy to bend to my will. Not one of you would dare to defy me!”

I chose that moment to shape-shift into a bee, buzz up Surt’s teeny-tiny nose, and jab him with my stinger.

With a howl of pain, Surt dropped his sword and shrank to his previous size. I changed into my true form.

“*I* dare.”

I whipped one end of my golden garrote around his neck and yanked it tight. Then I snatched up his flame sword and with one upward flick, sliced

off his pubescent nose. “Jack and Magnus send their regards.”

Surt lunged for me. I transformed into a bighorn sheep and head-butted him right where his nose used to be. Then I changed back to human, tightened the garrote until his eyes bulged, and threatened him with his own sword. “Come at me again,” I warned, “and you’ll regret it.”

I surveyed the stunned deities. “If one einherji can do this, imagine what all of us can do. And *will* do, come Ragnarok. We are not destined to win, but we will fight with honor. We would welcome you on our side of the fight. But, if you must side with him”—I gave the garrote a vicious tug and was rewarded with a gurgle from Surt—“know this: I will personally hunt you down on the Last Battlefield of Vigridr and see that you are sent straight to Ginnungagap. The choice is yours.”

The deities vanished.

I nodded. “Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

I admit it: I was feeling a bit full of myself. Then I realized my predicament. I couldn’t return to Valhalla, not with Surt wrapped in my garrote. Odin frowns on bringing nasties like him into his realm. And if I let Surt go, he’d attack me—the flaming rage in his eyes made that pretty clear.

I was starting to panic—just a little—when I heard a distant *ding*. Sam, Hearth, Blitz, Halfborn, T.J., and Mallory charged in, weapons drawn and ready, only to skid to a halt when they saw me with Surt on a leash and his sword in my hand.

“Hey, guys,” I said. “How is it you’re not burned to a crisp?”

“A little elfish shielding magic.” Sam nodded at Hearth. Arms raised wide overhead, the elf’s face was contorted with effort. “Good thing he had a spare algiz rune, or we’d all be toast.”

“Why’d you come here, though?” I asked. “Not that I’m not glad to see you. Just confused.”

“Jack told us you were in trouble,” T.J. said. “He heard it from a billy club, who heard it from a slingshot, who heard it from your garrote.”

“And speaking of garrotes,” Mallory added, eyeing the wire digging into Surt’s throat, “it seems you don’t need our help after all.”

“Actually, I could use some assistance,” I admitted.

“Got just what you need, right here.” Blitzen stepped forward holding a thin silvery rope. “Nowhere near the same quality as Gleipnir or the new rope holding Fenris Wolf, but it’ll do in a pinch.”

While he hog-tied Surt with some sweet cowboy roping moves, Sam turned to me. “What the Helheim happened here, anyway?”

“Long story. I’ll tell you in the elevator.”

“Then if we’re all ready, after you, little . . . erm . . .” Halfborn looked me over. “Lady?”

I grinned. “Got it in one.”

We headed to the doorway. At the last moment, I flicked my garrote free from Surt’s neck. Then I held up his sword. “I’m keeping this. Souvenir of our special time together. And one more thing. The next time you try plotting against us, remember this.”

I gestured to my friends.

“We’ll be ready.”







# Goal Achieved! Sort of . . .

BY THOR

ASGARD. MIDGARD. Nidavellir. Alfheim. Jotunheim. Helheim. Niflheim. Vanaheim. Muspellheim. Trekking through the Nine Worlds to rack up ten million steps wasn't easy. The chafing and blisters alone nearly ended my quest to earn a cameo on my favorite Midgard television show. But I'd do it all over again if I had to.

## GLOSSARY

**A**ESIR—gods of war, close to humans

**A**LFHEIM—the home of the light elves, ruled by the god Frey

**A**SGARD—the home of the Aesir

**B**ALDER—god of light, the second son of Odin and Frigg, and twin brother of Hod. Frigg made all earthly things swear to never harm her son, but she forgot about mistletoe. Loki tricked Hod into killing Balder with a dart made of mistletoe.

**B**EAR **G**RYLLS—a British adventurer best known for his television series *Man vs. Wild*

**B**IFROST—the rainbow bridge leading from Asgard to Midgard

**B**OUDICA—a queen of the British Celtic Iceni tribe who led a revolt against occupying Romans in 61 CE

**E**INHERJAR (**E**INHERJI, sing.)—great heroes who have died with bravery on Earth; soldiers in Odin’s eternal army; they train in Valhalla for Ragnarok, when the bravest of them will join Odin against Loki and the giants in the battle at the end of the world

**F**ENRIS **W**OLF—an invulnerable wolf born of Loki’s affair with a giantess; his mighty strength strikes fear even in the gods, who keep him tied to a rock on an island. He is destined to break free on the day of Ragnarok.

**F**IMBULWINTER—three years of unending winter immediately preceding Ragnarok

**F**OLKVANGER—the Vanir afterlife for slain heroes, ruled by the goddess Freya

**F**ORSETI—god of justice

**F**REY—the god of spring and summer; the sun, the rain, and the harvest; abundance and fertility, growth and vitality. Frey is the twin brother of

Freya and, like his sister, is associated with great beauty. He is the lord of Alfheim.

**F**REYA—the goddess of love; twin sister of Frey; ruler of Folkvanger

**F**RIGG—goddess of marriage and motherhood; Odin's wife and the queen of Asgard; mother of Balder and Hod

**G**ARM—the guard dog of Hel

**G**INNUNGAGAP—the primordial void; a mist that obscures appearances

**G**JALLAR—Heimdall's horn

**G**LAMOUR—illusion magic

**G**LEIPNIR—a rope made by dwarves to keep Fenris Wolf in bondage

**G**LUM—a minor goddess, a handmaiden of Frigg

**G**UNGNIR—Odin's staff

**H**EIDRUN—the goat in the Tree of Laeradr whose milk is brewed for the magical mead of Valhalla

**H**EIMDALL—god of vigilance and the guardian of Bifrost, the gateway to Asgard

**H**EL—goddess of the dishonorable dead; born of Loki's affair with a giantess

**H**ELHEIM—the underworld, ruled by Hel and inhabited by those who died in wickedness, old age, or illness

**H**LADGUNNR—daughter of Hel; granddaughter of Loki; a Valkyrie that played tricks on her victims

**H**LIDSKJALF—the High Seat of Odin

**H**OD—Balder's blind brother

**H**OLLER—Norse god of disease, destruction, and disaster

**H**ONIR—the Aesir god of indecision, avoidance, and mystery

**H**ULDER—a domesticated forest sprite

**H**VERGELMIR—the hot springs surrounding Yggdrasil

**J**OTUN—giant

**J**OTUNHEIM—realm of the earth giants

**L**OFN—goddess of arranged marriages

**L**OKI—god of mischief, magic, and artifice; the son of two giants, Farbauti and Laufey; adept with magic and shape-shifting. He is alternately malicious and heroic to the Asgardian gods and to humankind. Because of his role in the death of Balder, Loki was chained by Odin to three giant boulders with a poisonous serpent coiled over his head. The venom of the snake occasionally irritates Loki's face, and his writhing can cause earthquakes.

**L**YNGVI—the Isle of Heather, where Fenris Wolf is bound

**M**IDGARD—realm of the humans

**M**IMIR—an Aesir god who, along with Honir, traded places with Vanir gods Frey and Njord at the end of the war between the Aesir and the Vanir. When the Vanir didn't like his counsel, they cut off his head and sent it to Odin. Odin placed the head in a magical well, where the water brought it back to life, and Mimir soaked up all the knowledge of the World Tree.

**M**JOLNIR—Thor's hammer

**M**USPELLHEIM—the home of the fire giants and demons

**N**ÁBRÓK—pants made out of a corpse's skin

**N**IDAVELLIR—the home of the dwarves

**N**IDHOGG—the dragon that lives at the bottom of the World Tree and chews on its roots

**N**IFLHEIM—the world of ice, fog, and mist

**O**DIN—the “All-Father” and king of the gods; the god of war and death, but also poetry and wisdom. By trading one eye for a drink from the Well of Wisdom, Odin gained unparalleled knowledge. He has the ability to observe

all the Nine Worlds from his throne in Asgard; in addition to his great hall, he also resides in Valhalla with the bravest of those slain in battle.

**R**AGNAROK—the Day of Doom or Judgment, when the bravest of the einherjar will join Odin against Loki and the giants in the battle at the end of the world

**R**ATATOSK—an invulnerable squirrel that constantly runs up and down the World Tree carrying insults between the eagle that lives at the top and Nidhogg, the dragon that lives at the roots

**S**AEHRIMNIR—the magical beast of Valhalla; every day it is killed and cooked for dinner and every morning it is resurrected; it tastes like whatever the diner wants

**S**ESSRUMNIR—the Hall of Many Seats, Freya's mansion in Folkvanger

**S**IERSGRUNNR—Norse for *cheesebutt*

**S**IF—goddess of the earth; mother of Uller by her first husband; Thor is her second husband; the rowan is her sacred tree

**S**NOTRA—goddess of prudence and self-discipline

**S**UMARBRANDER—the Sword of Summer

**S**URT—lord of Muspellheim

**T**HANE—a lord of Valhalla

**T**HOR—god of thunder; son of Odin. Thunderstorms are the earthly effects of Thor's mighty chariot rides across the sky, and lightning is caused by hurling his great hammer, Mjolnir.

**T**REE OF LAERADR—a tree in the center of the Feast Hall of the Slain in Valhalla containing immortal animals that have particular jobs

**T**YR—god of courage, law, and trial by combat; he lost a hand to Fenris's bite when the Wolf was restrained by the gods

**U**TTGARD-**L**OKI—the most powerful sorcerer of Jotunheim; king of the mountain giants

**V**ALHALLA—paradise for warriors in the service of Odin

**V**ALKNUT—a Norse design of three interlocked triangles; the word comes from *vair*, meaning *slain warriors*, and *knut*, meaning *knot*

**V**ALKYRIE—Odin's handmaidens, who choose slain heroes to bring to Valhalla

**V**ANAHEIM—the home of the Vanir

**V**ANIR—gods of nature; close to elves

**V**IGRIDR—a plain that will be the site of the battle between the gods and Surt's forces during Ragnarok

**Y**GGDRASIL—the World Tree

# PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

AESIR	<i>AY-ser</i>
ALFHEIM	<i>ALF-haym</i>
ALGIZ	<i>AL-gheets</i>
ASGARD	<i>AZ-gahrrd</i>
BALDER	<i>BALL-der</i>
BIFROST	<i>BEE-frrohst</i>
DAGAZ	<i>DAH-gahz</i>
EINHERJAR/EINHERJI	<i>in-HAIRR-yar/in-HAIRR-yee</i>
EITRI	<i>EE-tree</i>
FENRIS	<i>FEHN-rrihss</i>
FIMBULWINTER	<i>FEEM-bool-ween-ter</i>
FOLKVANGER	<i>FOHK-vahn-ger</i>
FORSETI	<i>FORR-seh-tee</i>
FREY	<i>FRRAY</i>
FREYA	<i>FRRAY-uh</i>
FRIGG	<i>FRRIHG</i>
GARM	<i>GAHRRM</i>
GEBO	<i>GIH-bo</i>

<b>G</b> INNUNGAGAP	<i>GEEN-un-guh-gahp</i>
<b>G</b> LEIPNIR	<i>GLYP-neer</i>
<b>G</b> LUM	<i>GLOOM</i>
<b>H</b> A GALAZ	<i>HA-ga-lahts</i>
<b>H</b> EIDRUN	<i>HY-druhn</i>
<b>H</b> EIMDALL	<i>HAME-doll</i>
<b>H</b> EL	<i>HEHL</i>
<b>H</b> ELGI	<i>HEL-ghee</i>
<b>H</b> ELHEIM	<i>HEHL-haym</i>
<b>H</b> LA DGUNNR	<i>H'LAHD-goo-ner</i>
<b>H</b> LIDSKJALF	<i>H'LIHD-skelf</i>
<b>H</b> OD	<i>rhymes with odd</i>
<b>H</b> OLLER	<i>HO-lair</i>
<b>H</b> UNDING	<i>HOON-deeng</i>
<b>H</b> VERGELMIR	<i>H'VERR-gehl-meer</i>
<b>I</b> SA	<i>EES-ah</i>
<b>J</b> O TUN	<i>YOH-toon</i>
<b>J</b> O TUNHEIM	<i>YOH-toon-haym</i>
<b>K</b> ENAZ	<i>KEH-nahtz</i>
<b>L</b> AERADR	<i>LAY-rrah-dur</i>

LAGAZ	<i>lah-GAHTS</i>
LOFN	<i>LOH-fin</i>
LOKI	<i>LOH-kee</i>
LYNGVI	<i>LEENG-vee</i>
MIDGARD	<i>MIHD-gahrrd</i>
MIMIR	<i>MEE-meer</i>
MJOLNIR	<i>MEE’OHL-neer</i>
MUSPELLHEIM	<i>MOOS-pehl-haym</i>
NáBRÓK	<i>NO-broke</i>
NIDAVELLIR	<i>Nee-duh-vehl-EER</i>
NIDHOGG	<i>NEED-hawg</i>
NIFLHEIM	<i>NIHF-uh-haym</i>
ODIN	<i>OH-dihn</i>
RAGNAROK	<i>RAG-nuh-rrawk</i>
RATATOSK	<i>RAT-uh-tawsk</i>
SAEHRIMNIR	<i>SAY-h’rrihm-neer</i>
SAMIRAH AL-ABBAS	<i>Sah-MEER-ah ahl-AH-bahss</i>
SESSRUMNIR	<i>SEHSS-rroom-neer</i>
SIERSGRUNNR	<i>Sears-grroon-ner</i>
SIF	<i>SEEV</i>
	<i>SNOH-rree</i>

S NORRI	
S NOTRA	<i>SNOH-trah</i>
SUMARBRANDER	<i>SOO-marr-brrand-der</i>
SURT	<i>SERT</i>
THOR	<i>THORE</i>
T IWAZ	<i>TEE-vahz</i>
T YR	<i>TEER</i>
U RUZ	<i>OOR-oots</i>
UTGARD-LOKI	<i>OOT-gahrrd-LOH-kee</i>
V ALHALLA	<i>Val-HAHL-uh</i>
V ALKNUT	<i>valk-NOOT</i>
V ALKYRIE	<i>VAL-kerr-ee</i>
V ANAHEIM	<i>VAN-uh-haym</i>
V ANIR	<i>Vah-NEER</i>
V IGRIDR	<i>VEE-grree-der</i>
Y GGDRASIL	<i>IHG-drruh-sihl</i>

## RUNES (IN ORDER OF MENTION)

DAGAZ—new beginnings, transformations



GEBO—gift



LAGAZ—water, liquefaction



ALGIZ—shielding



ISA—ice



URUZ—ox



HAGALAZ—hail



KENAZ—the torch



TIWAZ—the rune of Tyr

